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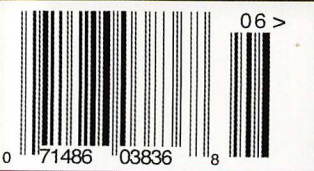
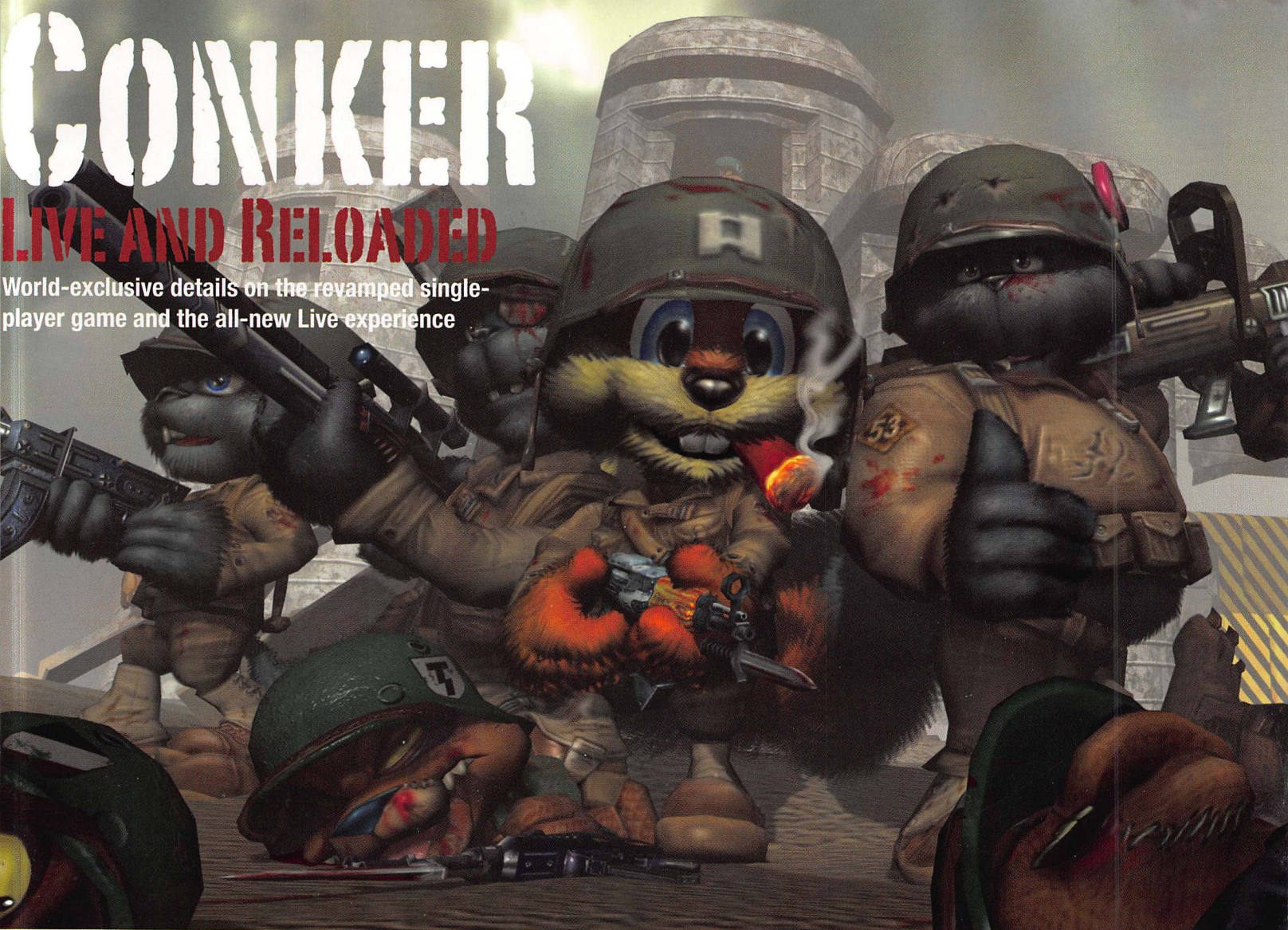
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Feature ///
Insomniac

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Anime ///
Gad Guard

Geneon's new Heavy Metal anime from Gonzo



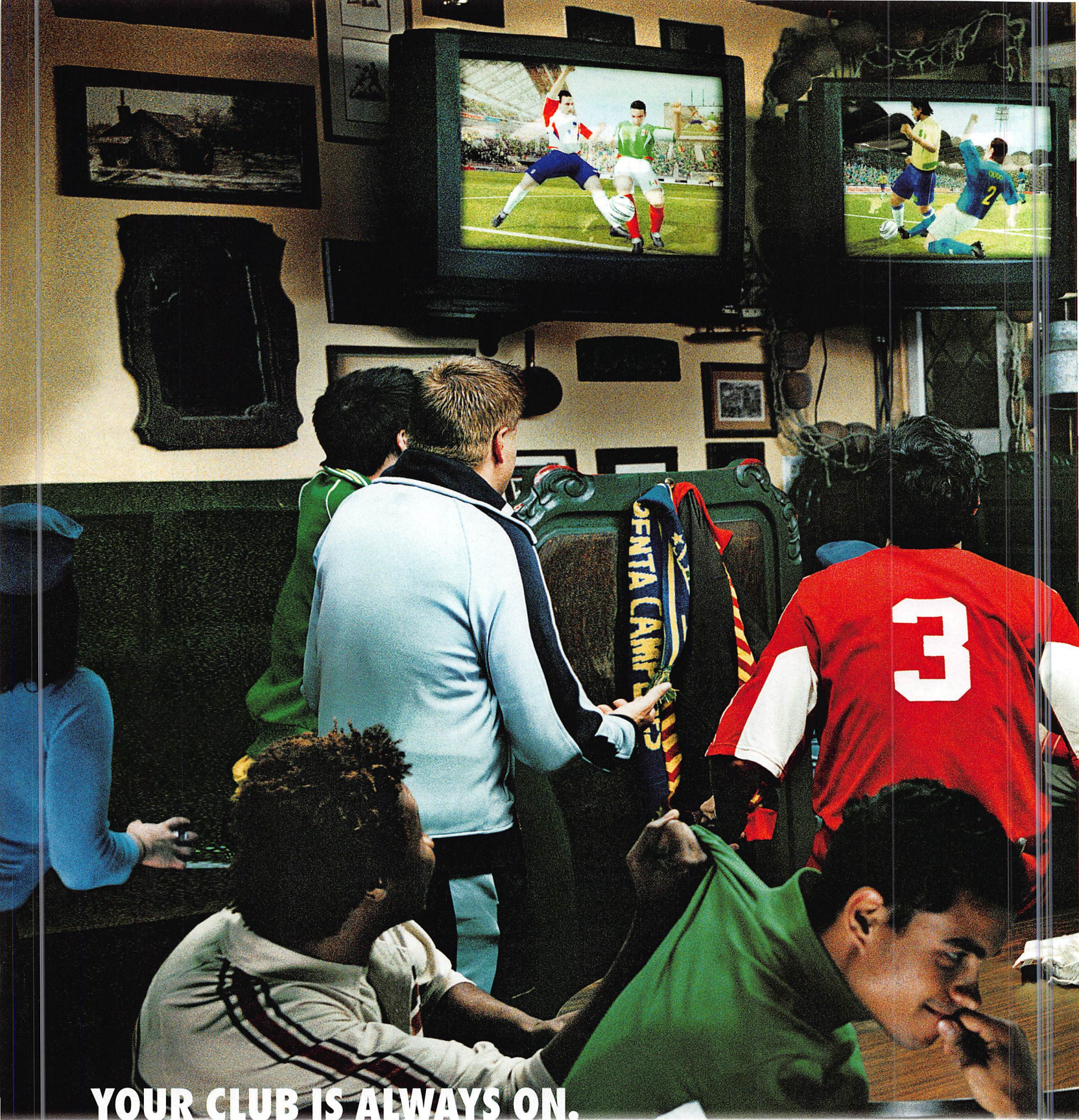
Interview ///
Bruce Campbell

Bruce on Bubba, the business and B-movies









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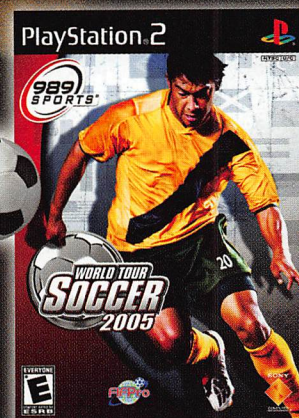
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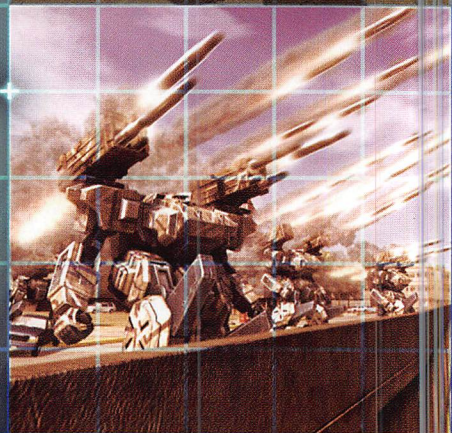
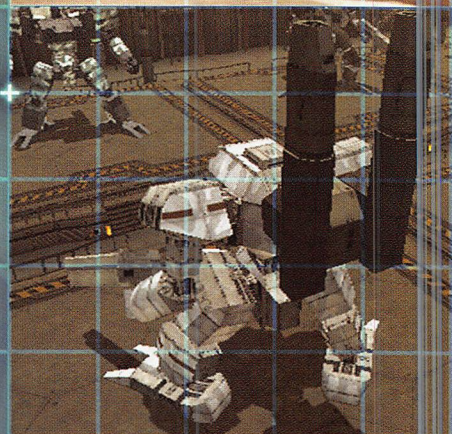
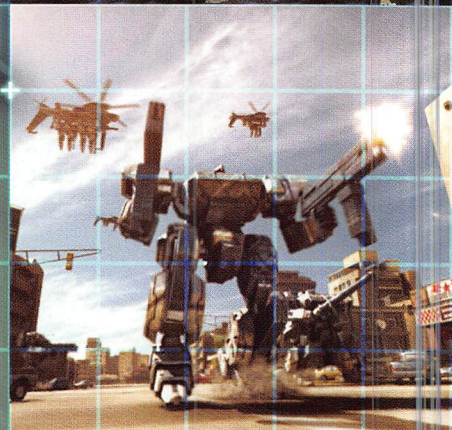
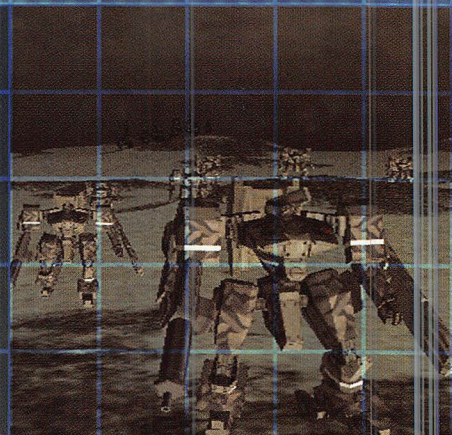
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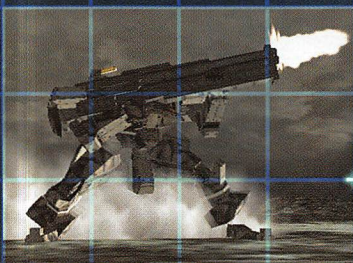
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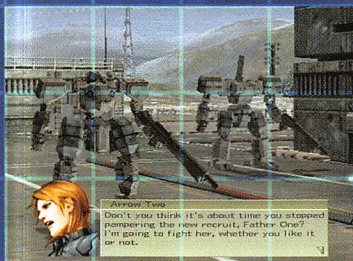


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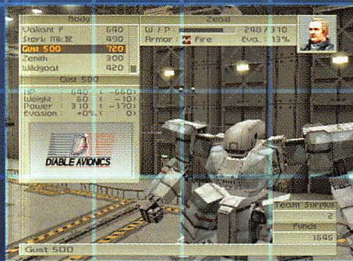
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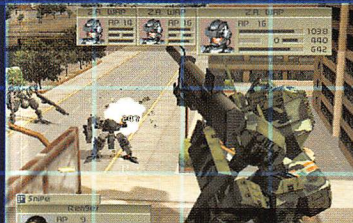
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The show must go on



Heading into E3 this year (which we'll be doing just days after we close this issue), little has been left to the imagination. In fact, I'll be surprised if there are more than

half a dozen games that we haven't already seen or at least heard about amidst all of the pre-E3 hoopla. It used to be that more games were kept under wraps, making that initial assault of the Convention Center halls like a treasure hunt, slicing through the massive crowds hired to clog the aisles (at least it seems that way), investigating every last kiosk among the monolithic structures each company erects in its honor. Not that I don't enjoy the gross excess that is E3 every year—a three-day competition (that is, after weeks of junkets) to see how much you can drink and still be coherent enough to either describe or listen to the description of a game—but I can certainly think of better ways to hype gaming's wares. Like a marathon film-festival, for instance, where inside of nice, big, dark air conditioned theatres, each company could book an hour to show their latest and greatest on the big screen while the developer explained why we should care. Now that would be a show. Retailers would get the scoops they need and the press, well, we just want the assets and a playable anyway. There are those who definitely get it, booking back-to-back developer interviews for members of the press, but for the most part, E3 seems, well, too big for its own good. I look at the film industry and envy them for all of the fun they have at events like Cannes.

Not so long ago, things were very different. I fondly remember the Vegas and Chicago CESes of the early '90s, when it was more developer and press mano a mano. You made a great magazine and the president of the studio would give you the exclusive on the spot and have you come down

afterwards to hang out and pick your art—none of this “well, let me check with so and so, I know we have an embargo with somebody.” Then, after a day of wall-to-wall new games, Namco would rent the entire arcade at Caesar's Palace and our rowdy half-drunk posse of press and developers would take over the Suzuka bikes, and then later the Virtua Racing cars at the Luxor. Now those were parties. As I've done since CES was dropped in 1995 (in favor of E3; wow, three nights in LA—thanks a lot), I'm more than happy to go and see all of the wonderful people that work in this industry, many of whom I work with everyday, and duck behind the scenes to see the people who really make this thing go, but from there I'll be forgoing the “parties” (mostly overbooked stampedes) for a nice dinner and then off to my room to take notes, play some games and, with any luck, catch some of those wacky remotes from the show floor. It's always fun to see the Today Show bumble around in Kentia Hall about the latest interactive Barbie game. For me, it's always been about the games and the people that make them. But in defense of the other 99 percent of the industry who love this stuff, let me just say this: be careful out there!

We'll see you next issue with the results.

“In fact, I'll be surprised if there are more than half a dozen games that we haven't already seen or at least heard about amidst all of the pre-E3 hoopla.”

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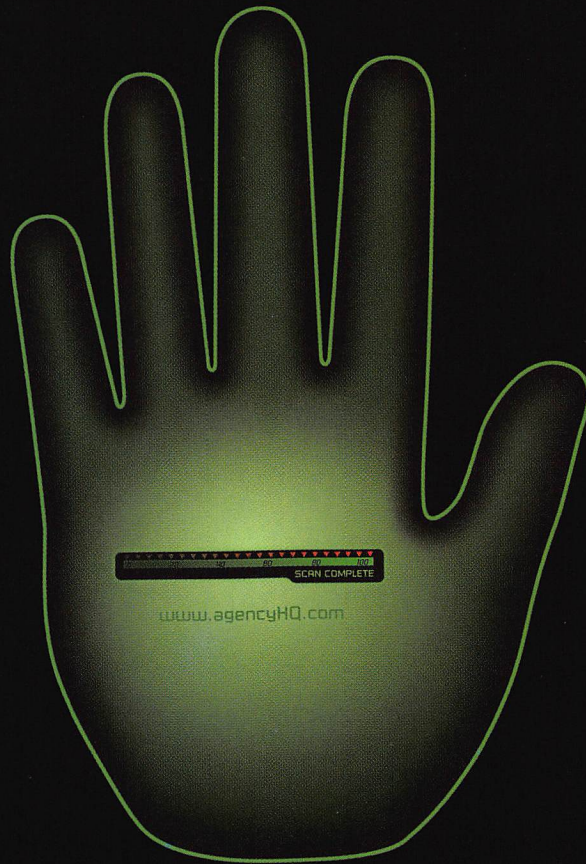
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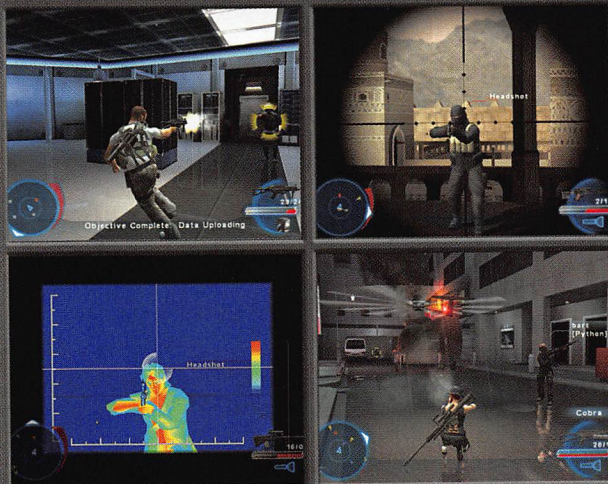
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Celebrity or not celebrity...that is the question.

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Conker: Live and Reloaded

The N64 version of Conker was nothing short of a video game milestone. Now he's back and Microsoft's got him. Take a first look at the stunning single-player remake as well as the new and improved online mode.

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It's been 10 years since the founding of the company that brought us Spyro and Ratchet & Clank. We go behind the scenes of this esteemed developer for an insightful look at the view from the top.



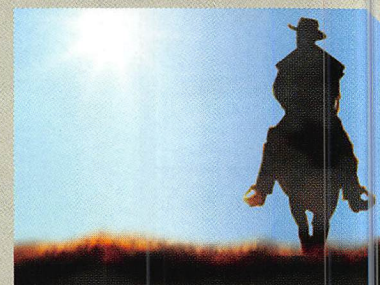
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Ghost Hunter



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Metal Gear Solid 3



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Red Dead Revolver

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play pc

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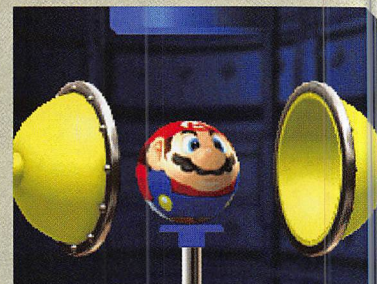
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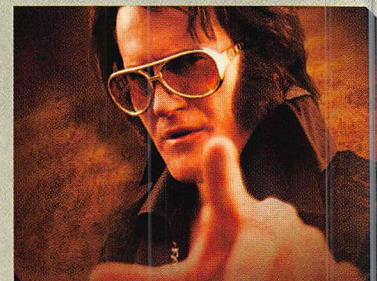
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Painkiller



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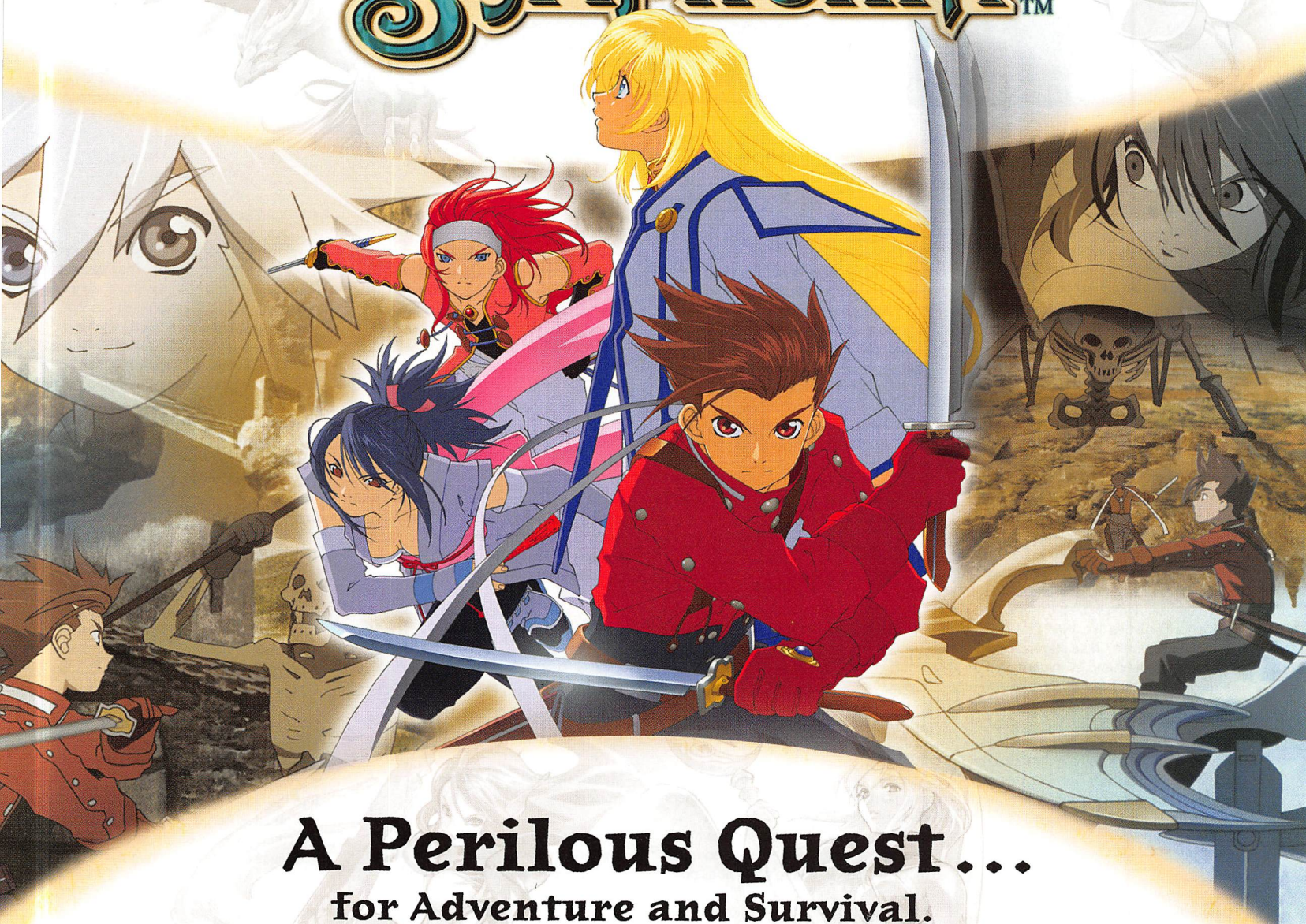
Mario Pinball



090

Bruce Campbell

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Naughty or Knights?

"When it comes to this one, even we don't know why we don't get it. Well, let me rephrase that: we know why, I guess we don't understand how no one else considers mediocre art and animation a bad thing."

Oh, we do, we do, we just consider contrived, redundant, and clichéd gameplay a worse thing, and which is, of course, the domain of Final Fantasy in general and X-2 in particular. Look, you don't have to like KOTOR. The game already has so many accolades that Bioware is going to need a new shelf, which could made be of solid gold for all the cash its raked in, and your denial of it wouldn't be the world's greatest injustice, but you don't have to begrudge it for that. I love Play magazine because no one there seems to give a crap about mass opinion and it's often the one place avant garde games like JSRF can get their due, but it shouldn't be a surprise when the opposite happens and everyone loves a game but you. Just being unbiased already puts you in a severe minority, embrace that status proudly, but realize the people who love KOTOR aren't seeing the same game you are and there's nothing right or wrong about it. Hell, I bought Gunvalkyrie based on your review and hated it, didn't mean I couldn't see where you liked it.

Marcus

Celebrity Challenge

While I agree with the premise you unveil, there are certainly pros and cons to using real-life characters in video games. On the con side let me remind you of the "Street Fighter: The Movie" game. Now I know this game had its fair share of problems beyond the characters themselves, but I think the distain for this title is deeper than that. People did not want to play as Raul Julia playing M. Bison. They want to play as the "real" M. Bison, period. For instance, what actor would people want to play as in a Batman game? Val Kilmer? George Clooney? Mike Keaton? Probably none of them. We want to be Batman, not Mr. Mom playing as Batman. There are some pros

that I have to point out. Take the X-Files game. Would anyone want to even consider this game without Scully and Mulder? I don't think so. I think the reason is some actors are an integral part of a character's development and therefore the character's (and show/movie's) success or failure. When done right, we will identify these actors with these characters. i.e. Jennifer Garner is Sydney. So is it too early to judge Van Helsing? Maybe. Should game developers stick with the original characters from the subject manner we know and love? Yes. Would we buy a game with Adam West as Batman? Absolutely!

Jacob R

"How are you supposed to be lost in a story you're making when some lamer is griping about how he needs X sword to max his stats, or someone else is griping about how their real job sucks?"

After I read your article in the latest Play, I was so happy to finally hear that someone else out there is just a little strange about controlling a virtual doll of a movie character. The developers have so much more talent than that to waste it all on making the most realistic Hugh Jackman scruff, or the most jiggle-tastic Jennifer Garner. So mark me down on the list for gamers who want less realistic movie games. Thanks for writing some of the best video game articles I have ever read.

Tom P.

Once again you've made my brain hurt. Damn these significant questions! I now realize that I've always had this question rattling around in the back of my head. I have fond memories of celebrities in 16-bit games like Rambo and Moonwalker (and I always imagined the actors when playing Platoon and Batman on NES), but come to think of it, it has become creepier now that

they've become three-dimensional. Still, I bet if you really put it to the test, all of these movie games are probably selling to the general public, and their (the celebrities) individual fan bases. They obviously think of hardcore gamers last, I think, when they make these. I mean, look at the state of them. Charlie's Angels anyone...Crouching Tiger Hidden Crap? I know! ...Let's go back to 16-bit!

Lenny K

Good point; Moonwalker and Rambo were awesome. So you don't think Charlie's Angels was game-of-the-year material? Maybe Ubi should stay away from the celebrity game, eh?

Massively Multiplayer Online Chat Rooms?

I recently read your editorial and I just wanted to say you nailed it. I personally can't stand games based completely on a movie. They always seem like pale comparisons to really thought-out games like Deus Ex, Neverwinter Nights and Castlevania. They are also some of the first titles that hit the bargain bin as well. Try finding a copy of that X-men Wolverine game.

Perhaps another issue that should be addressed is all these MMORPG-crazy developers. Not everyone is interested in getting off a hard day of work dealing with complete nimrods to go home and hop on a game online and dealing with complete... nimrods. The MMORPG craze has to stop. A few are okay, but there are just too many and so far I haven't really seen one that I really want to play. The RPGs I like all have one thing in common...a great story. Most MMORPGs don't and it seems like

developers are forgetting that the center to every great RPG is a story. They can shout from the rooftops how players make their own story, but I think that's just laziness. How are you supposed to be lost in a story you're making when some lamer is griping about how he needs X sword to max his stats, or someone else is griping about how their real job sucks? MMORPGs are just chat rooms with stat sheets.

Dan P.

Import Dreams

The "Japan Now" section in Play magazine is brilliant. I wish you would expand it by a couple pages. I was pleased to see that you included a Dreamcast game (Psyvariar 2) in April's issue. Ever since Ikaruga came out on DC, there has been a steady trickle of DC releases. There was Border Down, Psyvariar 2, Puyo Puyo Fever (by Sonic Team!!) and now Castle of Shikigami 2. Hopefully, there will be more releases in the future and I hope you will cover them. How about an article on all the great DC software from UK & Japan that never made it to the USA? Games like Shenmue 2, Headhunter, Rez, Zero Gunner 2...etc. That would be the cat's pajamas.

Please give it some thought.

Regards,
Kent R.

You've read our minds. Stay tuned.

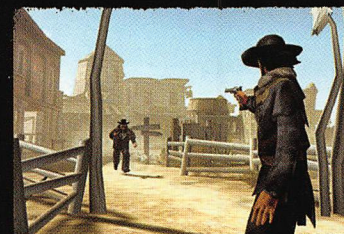
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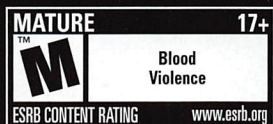


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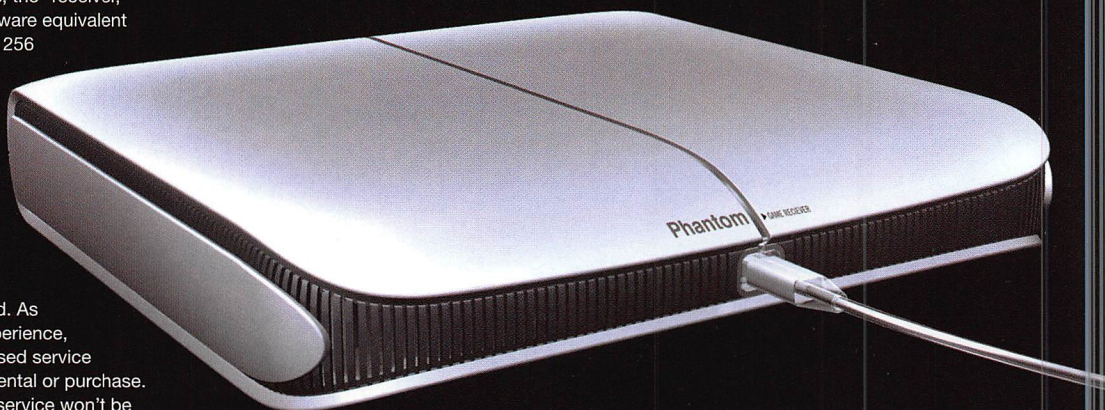


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The Phantom materializes

Infinium Labs proves that their gaming machine is real and perhaps revolutionary

There has been much speculation about the upcoming Phantom gaming device; now it's one step closer to reality. According to manufacturer Infinium Labs, their potentially revolutionary device will be available on Nov. 18, consisting of equal parts game console and convenient delivery service, not dissimilar to movies-on-demand. As far as the console portion goes, the "receiver," which connects to the user's TV, contains hardware equivalent to a 2.5 GHz upper-mid-range gaming PC with 256 megs of RAM, built to spec so that it will be able to adequately play most games for at least three years down the road. The slick-looking machine comes complete with an innovative laptop controller that consists of a keyboard and mouse; the keyboard is hinged at a 15-degree angle so that players can use the keypad with the left hand while they actually control the mouse with the right hand beneath the keyboard, and it's also fully rotatable in case you want to play it left-handed. As for the delivery service half of the Phantom experience, the Phantom will function as a subscription-based service that should let users download PC games for rental or purchase. Partners offering games through the Phantom service won't be announced until August, but the content should include both new games as well as older titles not available at retail. If players opt to sign up for a two-year service contract at \$29.95 per month, they get the Phantom hardware for free; otherwise, the unit will cost \$199. Additional fees for rentals (\$5 for three days) and purchases (\$20 - \$40) will apply. If the Phantom hits big, PC gaming as we know it could be forever changed.



Slick click

The Phantom's control device combines a mouse and keyboard in a convenient laptop configuration. Controllers can also be attached.

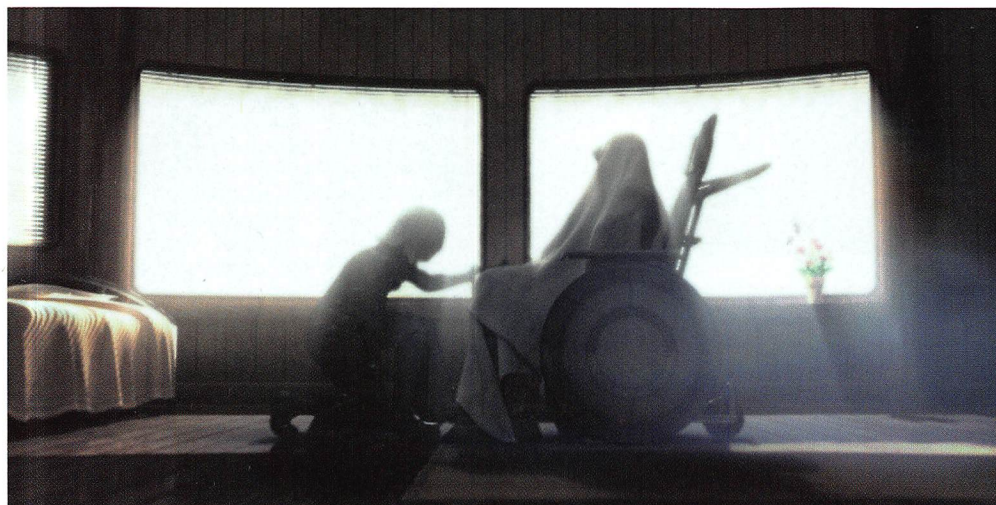


Advent Children cometh

The latest on Square Enix's *Final Fantasy VII* follow-up

It's been two years since Cloud and company defeated Sephiroth and saved the world from Meteor's apocalyptic power. Midgar stands in ruins, while Cloud has shunned society, living in isolation. But now a mysterious disease challenges the new era of peace. This threat to the planet's life force calls heroes like Barret back into action, and even Aeris will make a return appearance (if only in flashback).

Such is the information Square Enix has revealed about *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, the much-anticipated CG movie sequel to the groundbreaking PlayStation game. An announcement by Square Enix confirms that the movie will be coming to North America on DVD, but, unfortunately, they have not revealed the release date or distributor. For now, we can just wait and hope that *Advent Children* will be as glorious as we all dream it will be...



I want my GBA TV!

Majesco tunes in the toons

TVs in cars, TVs in watches, TVs in urinals...TVs in Game Boy? Why yes; in a manner of speaking, at least. Majesco's new proprietary technology allows you to view "commercial-grade" (which roughly translates to "looks pretty damn good") video on a standard Nintendo Game Boy Advance system via a standard Nintendo-manufactured cartridge. Among the first carts available this spring will be *SpongeBob Squarepants*, *Sonic X* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, with many more planned down the line—Nintendo's even using the technology for *Pokémon*. These 100 percent anti-skip plug-and-play carts hold 45+ minutes of content, with longer content coming soon, including full-length features (the first 256MB carts will contain four episodes each for \$19.99). Once the carts are inserted, the GBA acts like a mini DVD player with controls for fast forward, fast rewind, chapter skip, chapter reverse and pause, and come complete with animated chapter menus. Now that's progress! No need to worry about interruptions either, as Majesco's officially licensed neckband-style GBA SP headphones (the first ever) are due at the same time (those clever devils). At just 10 bucks, quality is a concern, but the official release assures us they sound "terrific."

Who lives in a Game Boy under your jeans? *SpongeBob Squarepants*!!



A lucky charm for Capcom?

Clover Studio boasts renowned designers

Creating a uniquely external wing to its stalwart game development houses, Capcom has taken some of the gaming industry's most creative minds and formed a group that intends to be synonymous with the word "gameplay"—Clover Studio. Boasting the talents of *Resident Evil* mastermind Shinji Mikami and *Devil May Cry* director Hideki Kamiya, and helmed by Atsushi Inaba (producer on *Viewtiful Joe* and *Steel Battalion*), the new 64-person studio is prepared to create innovative content under the new moniker, starting with *Viewtiful Joe 2* for GameCube and PlayStation 2, along with the PS2 version of the original *Viewtiful Joe* (now featuring a guest appearance from DMC's Dante). Another title announced, *Okami*, will be out on PlayStation 2 sometime in 2005. This "nature adventure" game will revolve around the Shinto sun goddess, Amaterasu, who can become a wolf on her quest to restore light to the world.

"I'm pleased to support the formation of an independent studio whose mission is to develop creative games that are innovative and inspire the future of gaming," said Kenzo Tsujimoto, president and CEO, Capcom Co., Ltd. "Clover Studio is a creative entity comprised of a group of talented game designers who have a proven record of developing awe inspiring games that push creativity and technology. Clover Studio is good for Capcom and video gamers around the world."

According to Clover Studio's website, the group's name comes from a combination of the words "creative" and "lover," meaning that its members love to create, and also from the four-leaf clover's status as a symbol of good luck and happiness. The website also proclaims that the studio is looking to create games from a fresh viewpoint. "With resilience and vigor," the website states, "we plan to deliver awe-inspiring games that push creativity, technology and the boundaries that limit our imagination."



 CLOVER
STUDIO™

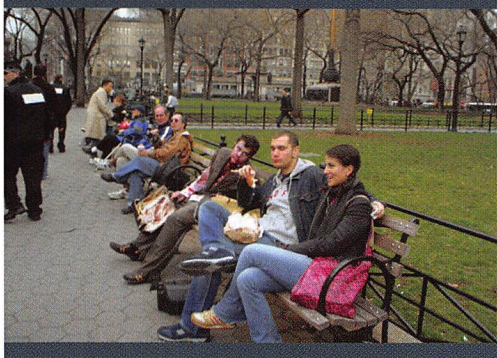
Famicom Mini, round 2

It seems as if a month can't go by without a retro gaming announcement coming out of the Nintendo camp. Following the release of the Game Boy Advance Famicom Mini Collection this past February, and the subsequent announcement that the North American version (called the Classic NES Series) will be coming in June, Nintendo has revealed that a second batch of 10 Famicom ports are on their way to Japanese GBAs. Arriving on May 21, the games in the collection will be Nintendo classics Mario Brothers, Clu Clu Land, Balloon Fight, Wrecking Crew and Dr. Mario, along with Dig Dug (Namco), Adventure Island (Hudson), Ghosts 'n Goblins (Capcom), Twinbee (Konami) and the original Ganbare Goemon (Konami), which never made it to the U.S. Each game will sell for 2000 yen (around \$18). As of press time, the games have not been announced for North America. How about Castlevania, Kid Icarus and Punch-Out!! next?



Bringing out the dead

Capcom held several events in April to help generate buzz for the release of Resident Evil: Outbreak. Simultaneously in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, zombies walked the streets, holding up traffic and creating a public nuisance in the name of adventure-horror gaming online. In addition, a public launch event was held at the Sony Metreon in San Francisco on April 2 in the spirit of Raccoon City.



I'm playing Final Fantasy; hold please

Yes, it's true. Americans will soon be playing the likes of Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy on their cell phones. No other information was available at press time; however, there's not a whole lot more we need to know besides...when!?



Bits & Rumors

Unconfirmed reports out of Japan state that Treasure is working on Advance Guardian Heroes for the GBA. According to the rumor, it will be a sequel to the Saturn classic, not a remake. ... There is justice! Blinx 2 is on its way from Microsoft! ... Electronic Arts appears to be getting behind the Nintendo DS in a big way. The company recently requested to double their number of DS dev systems. ... The original just recently hit the U.S., but Resident Evil: Outbreak File #2 has already been announced in Japan. ... Ubisoft is getting ready to unleash the eye of the tiger once again with Rocky Legends on PS2 and Xbox. The game will feature in-depth stories for characters such as Clubber Lang, Ivan Drago and Apollo Creed. ... Expect to hear an official announcement on the all-new GBA Zelda sooner rather than later. Capcom is once again doing the development honors. ... Sega's Shining series returns! A new Shining Force sequel, as well as a game called Shining Tears, is coming to PS2. ... Square has revealed that they are working on a single GBA cartridge containing enhanced remakes of Final Fantasy I & II. Nintendo will likely publish the game in North America.

Hollywood Woos Samus Aran

Eighteen years and six games into the series with another sequel on the way and...finally, someone has the sense to make a Metroid movie. That someone is legendary Hong Kong and a-list Hollywood director John Woo, most recently known for his big hits *Mission: Impossible 2* and *Face/Off*. A number of video games have already been announced as on their way to the big screen in the next couple years, and this one has to be at the top of the list. Woo's studio, Tiger Hill, actually snagged the expired rights to a Metroid movie from the previous holders, producers Warren Zide and Craig Perry of *American Pie* notoriety. "We are very fortunate that there is such an extensive amount of material to draw upon for the film, due to there being so many iterations of the game over the years," said Woo. Amen. Other than its focus on Samus Aran and the life-draining Metroid parasites, nothing at all is known about the film's script, which will most likely go through drastic revisions. The Metroid movie is expected to hit theatres in 2006, which marks Metroid's 20th anniversary in Japan.

Silicon Knights goes multiplatform

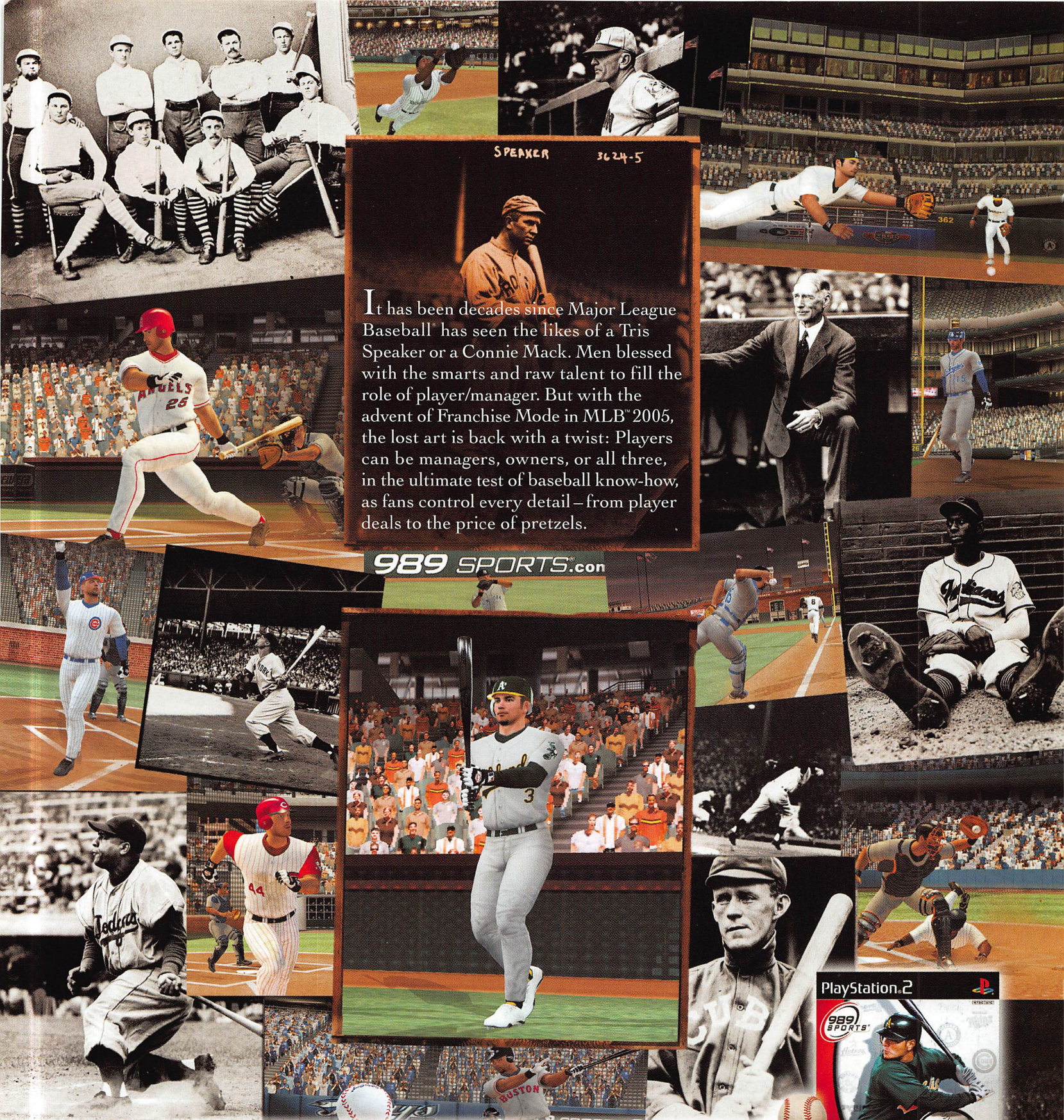
Silicon Knights appears to have ended its status as an exclusive second-party developer for Nintendo. No official announcement has been made by either party explaining the reasons or financial effects of what is being called a mutual decision, but the result is that Silicon Knights is now free to create content for non-Nintendo platforms such as the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Silicon Knights is certainly not ruling out continued support of Nintendo hardware either—not surprising considering Silicon Knights president Denis Dyack's well-known support of Nintendo. Strangely, the split was reported shortly after the release of the GameCube-exclusive Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes, which has sold respectably since hitting retail. Other questions, such as what company will handle publishing duties for future Silicon Knights titles, have yet to be answered.

Paging Dr. Mario

Who says that all those hours of gaming will never amount to anything? According to a recent study conducted at the Beth Israel Medical Center, playing video games actually has a significant impact on the proficiency of many surgeons. According to researchers, surgeons who spent at least three hours a week playing video games had a 37 percent reduction in errors when performing laparoscopic surgery, and they completed surgery an average of 27 percent faster than their non-gaming colleagues.

Dr. James "Butch" Rosser Jr., director of the Advanced Medical Technology Institute at Beth Israel and author of the study, was not surprised by the results. "Being a successful surgeon of any kind requires some of the same skills that go into being good at video games, including hand-eye coordination and spatial visualization skills." Rosser goes on to say that the study supports the idea that video games "can indeed be good teaching tools."

Dr. Paul J. Lynch, co-author of the study and research associate at Beth Israel, has been studying the psychological and physiological effects of video games for years. According to Lynch, "We theorize that video game playing may develop neural pathways that are later available for use in different arenas." Beth Israel has already started experimenting with the findings, and hopes to develop a program in which video game technology will be used to improve the skills of surgeons throughout the medical community.



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database



Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	Syphon Filter: Omega Strain sony / ps2
02	Red Dead Revolver rockstar / ps2, xb
03	Hitman: Contracts eidos / ps2, xb
04	Resident Evil: Outbreak capcom / ps2
05	Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow ubisoft / xb
06	Onimusha 3: Demon Siege capcom / ps2
07	Fight Night 2004 ea / ps2, xb
08	Van Helsing vu games / ps2, xb
09	Manhunt rockstar / xb
10	Transformers atari / ps2



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Mar. Game Sales

01	Ninja Gaiden tecmo / xb
02	Pokémon Colosseum nintendo / gc
03	MVP Baseball 2004 ea / ps2
04	Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow ubisoft / xb
05	MVP Baseball 2004 ea / xb
06	007: Everything or Nothing ea / ps2
07	Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes konami / gc
08	Final Fantasy XI w/ hard drive sony / ps2
09	Resident Evil: Outbreak capcom / ps2
10	MX Unleashed thq / ps2



Your Megastore Beckons!



Van Helsing
vu games / ps2, xb

You and Hugh Jackman have some monsters to kill. So it plays exactly like Devil May Cry...nothing wrong with that.



Transformers
atari / ps2

The robots in disguise are invading the PS2. Select your Autobot, equip your Mini-con power-ups and then kick Megatron's metal butt.



Manhunt
rockstar / xb

A message to mothers everywhere: do not let your children play this game. Everyone else, go kill to your heart's content. Sickos.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	Metroid Prime 2: Echoes nintendo / gc
02	Final Fantasy XII square enix / ps2
03	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater konami / ps2
04	Resident Evil 4 capcom / gc
05	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay vu games / xb
02	Red Dead Revolver rockstar / xb
03	Metal Slug 3 snk / xb
04	Thief: Deadly Shadows eidos / xb
05	Ninja Gaiden tecmo / xb



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	Onimusha 3: Demon Siege capcom / ps2
02	Fight Night 2004 ea / ps2
03	Siren sony / ps2
04	Front Mission 4 square enix / ps2
05	Winning Eleven 7 International konami / ps2



Chris Hoffman some editor

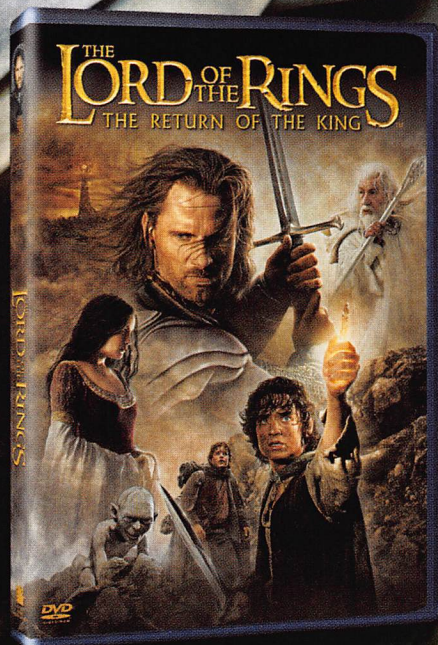
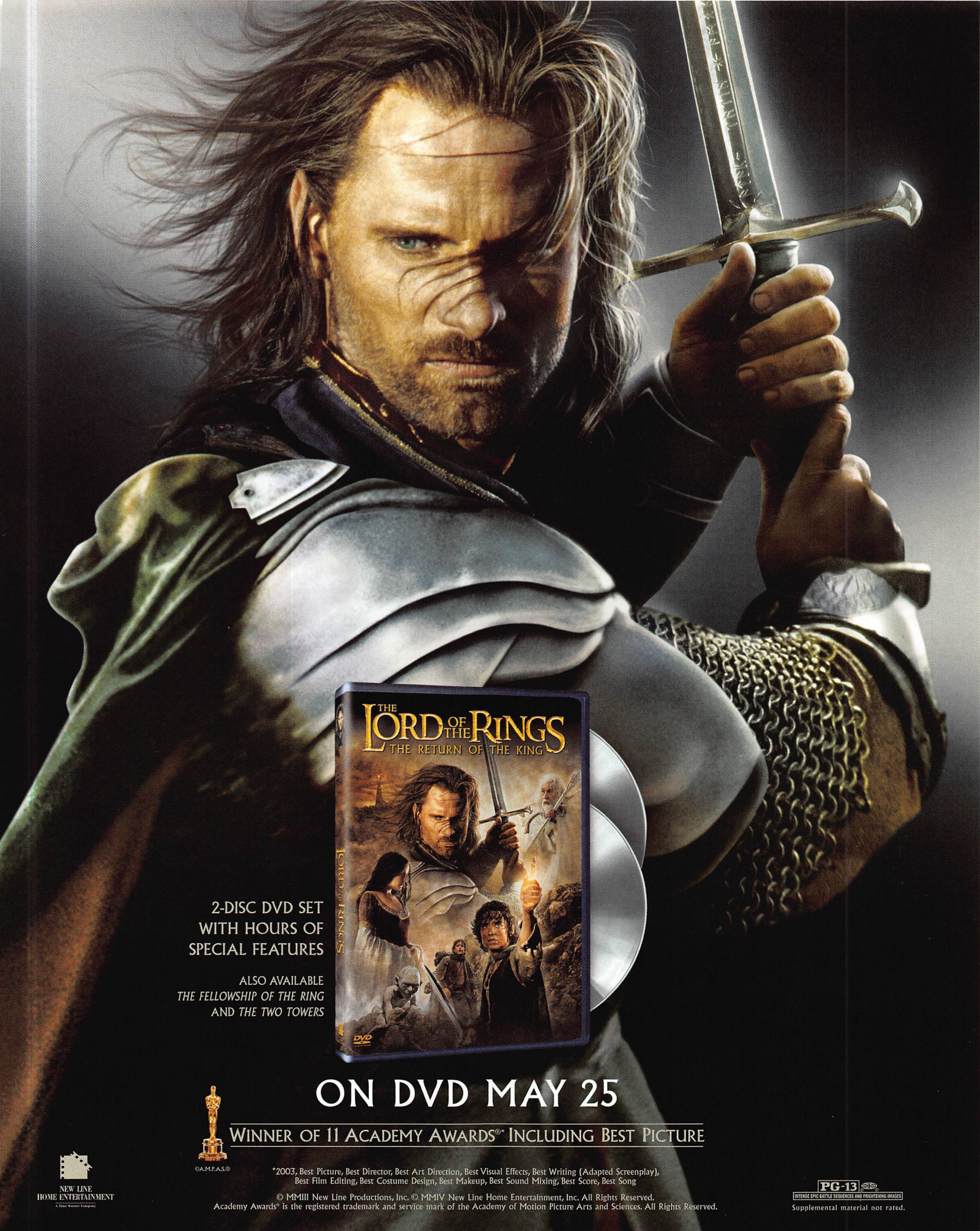
01	Mega Man Anniversary Collection capcom / ps2
02	Conker: Live and Reloaded microsoft / xb
03	Wild Arms: Alter code: F agetec / ps2
04	Shining Force atlus / gba
05	Tales of Symphonia namco / gc

Michael Hobbs art director

01	Final Fantasy XI Online square enix / pc
02	Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes konami / gc
03	Onimusha 3: Demon Siege capcom / ps2
04	Resident Evil: Outbreak capcom / ps2
05	Wario Ware, Inc. Mega Party Game\$ nintendo / gc

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	Far Cry ubisoft / pc
02	Conker: Live and Reloaded microsoft / xb
03	Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes konami / gc
04	Resident Evil: Outbreak capcom / ps2
05	Winning Eleven 7 International konami / ps2



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RESIDENT EVIL: Apocalypse

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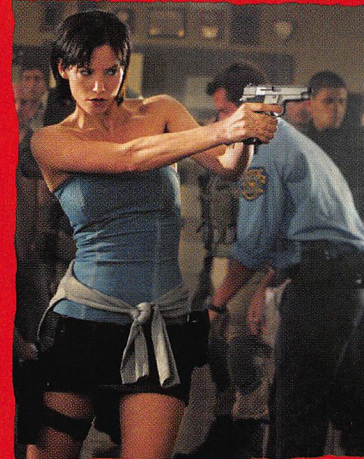
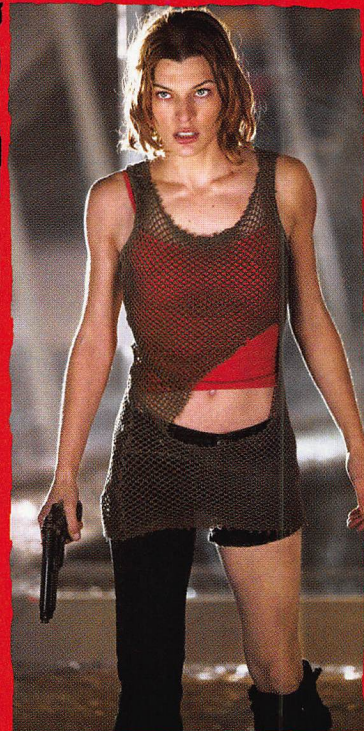
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PRODUCTION DESIGNER PAUL DENHAM AUSTERBERRY EDITOR EDDIE HAMILTON VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR ALISON O'BRIEN DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTIAN SEBALOT DEREK ROGERS, C.S.C. BASED UPON CAPCOM'S VIDEOGAME "RESIDENT EVIL"
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS HIROYUKI KOBAYASHI DAN KLETZKY EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BERND EICHINGER SAMUEL HADIDA ROBERT KULZER VICTOR HADIDA PRODUCED BY JEREMY BOLT PAUL W.S. ANDERSON, DON CARMODY WRITTEN BY PAUL W.S. ANDERSON
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CONKER

Live and Reloaded

It couldn't have happened to a nicer drunken squirrel

For a relatively unknown commodity, Conker has a tumultuous history. Back in the day, when any critter with a jump button was a big deal, and any critter with a jump button and Rare label an even bigger deal, Conker was born as a sweet little squirrel in a dreamy, fun-filled world. In fact, the original game was so sticky sweet that even the most die-hard platforming fanatics recoiled at its cuteness, causing creator (art director Chris Seavor) to do something as wickedly innovative as it was wickedly unheard of, and fashion the first truly mature platformer. Not mature as in violent, but mature as in drunk, disorderly, vomit-ridden,





excessively gory and altogether sex-crazed. From Conker beginning the game hung over to battling a massive, singing mountain of poo, it was all built around the same cute fuzzy-wuzzy squirrels and teddy bears (or Tediz as they're known in Conker) that people balked at. But Chris didn't stop there. That light bulb over his head was a beacon of things to come. He also had the foresight to build the game around parody, from storming the beach at Normandy (still the best rendition if you ask me) to spoofing the blockbusters of the day like *The Matrix* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. But this was no ordinary novelty game; this was a big, beautiful Rare platformer back when they literally ruled the gaming world as the U.S. counterpart to Miyamoto's Midas touch, sitting atop a Nintendo that ruled the industry with an iron fist back when it was their way or the highway.

Rare was also known for shipping no game before its

time. If it took 4-5 years, then so be it. So by the time Conker finally hit, the curtain was already falling on the Nintendo 64, not to mention cartridge-based console gaming altogether. Considering Nintendo's demographic at the time (pretty much an army of 8- to 12-year-olds) and with a box that said "Advisory: This game is not for anyone under age 17" on the front, and "Unless you're a fan of violence, foul language, and racy innuendo, you'd best steer clear of this one" on the back, it's no wonder Conker never really found his place in the world. It was by sheer power that Rare even got the game off the ground. In fact, it was cancelled partway through its development. Chris just kept working away...

For those who reveled in it on the N64, this completely rebuilt single-player version is like a dream come true. Graphically, Conker: Live and Reloaded (formerly titled Conker: Live and Uncut) exists in a class by itself,

dripping with so much detail and pillowy light it's hard to mentally process. It's also been buttoned up to perfection and now resides alongside an online and multiplayer experience as innovative and fully fleshed out as the game itself. For the uninitiated, you are simply in for the time of your life—a double whammy of epic proportions. When was the last time you got a platformer that's not only genius from beginning to end, but side-splittingly funny, accompanied by a multiplayer experience that's second to none? I think never. Rare games may take a while, but isn't a game you'll play all year and remember forever worth it? **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: Q4 or Q1 '05

"Not mature as in violent, but mature as in drunk, disorderly, vomit-ridden, excessively gory and altogether sex-crazed."

What a nice pair...and a happy couple!

INTERVIEW

Rare's own Chris Seavor on the evolution of gaming's nastiest critter...

play: Originally, Conker went from hyper-cute to the poster child for mature gaming. How did that come about? Was it your doing or did Nintendo ask for it?

Chris Seavor: Nintendo definitely didn't want this! [laughs] I had an idea to take the game in a different direction because of the over-saturation of cute games in the market. We already had three potentially cute games in development. I took it over, looked at it and said, "What can we do with this?" I'm a big fan of *South Park*, and we had just gotten it over here, so I thought we may as well do something along those lines. I spoke to Chris Stamper and he said, "Yeah go for it." Nintendo seemed all right... It wasn't any big, major political decision; everyone just sort of went, "Yeah, okay."

When Conker was super-cute, what was he up against before he was shredding Tediz?

The original Conker was never clearly defined. It was just another cute character; it could have just as well have

been a rat...we needed to give it an edge.

So did you come up with the whole war against the Tediz?

Yeah, pretty much. The strong part of Conker though is the movie parody toward the end. It went from a comedy game to a parody game. After we did the beach scene, everyone said, "Wow that's great, you need to do more of that!" To be honest, if I had it to do again, the whole game would be movie parody.

As amazing a game as Conker's Bad Fur Day was, it was a game ahead of its time and probably on the wrong hardware...

No doubt about that.

Since, the industry has come far, with the Xbox demographic evolving as much if not more than any because so many old-school gamers hopped onboard.

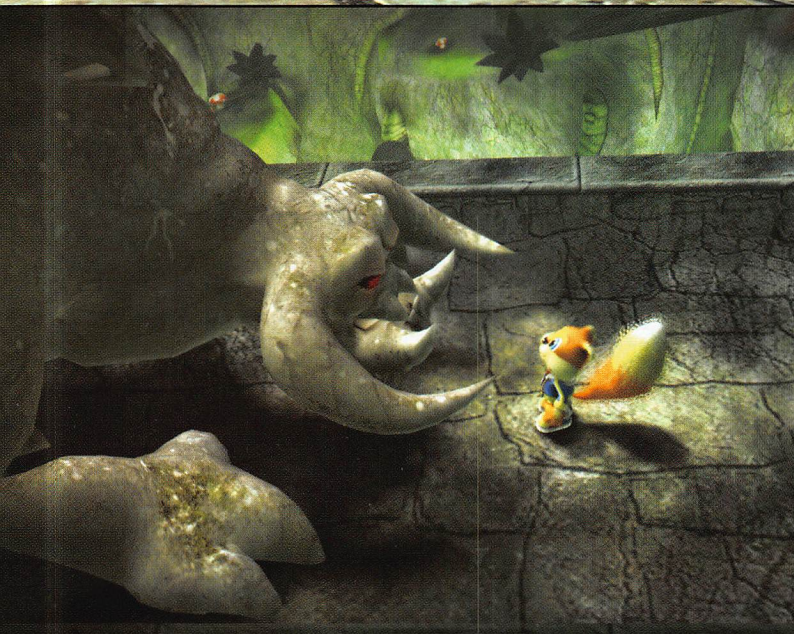
So, if this is going to be a rebirth—which it should be—if any platformer is going to make a stand and really hit the big numbers, it's gonna be this—would you approach a sequel in much the same way?

I just do things the way I do them... Yeah, it would be exactly the same way, because it's the only way I know. There were mistakes made in Conker, but I mean, I certainly wouldn't make the same mistakes again with the content. I would definitely refine it a bit, and make it a lot tighter.

I didn't see any mistakes.

The biggest problem in the game was that it wasn't as in-your-face as the last half of the game, and especially the last third of the game. If there's a sequel, I'm certainly not short of ideas. There have been quite a few movies made in that time...

Seeing the single-player game now...we were almost





speechless.

And we're only at 60 percent. It's a completely new engine; everything is new, completely new. At one point we considered doing a direct port, then we considered just bringing over the graphics and bumping up the polys... looked dreadful. Right, that's it, let's just take and make a new game... So that was the premise of it, so there's been a lot of work, and there's a lot more to do.

I was blown away by the fur in *Star Fox Adventures*, but this is ridiculous. What are you doing?

[Chuckling deviously] It's the same fur...it's just the number of shafts you can get away with and how you draw them...

One of the levels we weren't able to play, and that probably everyone who's played it is looking forward to

most, is the Beast of Poo Mountain.

Well, he looks like he's really made of poo now, and he has specular maps on him. The level itself has been completely reworked too...it looks really great.

He'd make a great action figure! Have you given much thought to merchandising? These characters are certainly up for it and the timing seems better than ever.

I was disappointed originally when there wasn't anything. Banjo had some figures and stuff. I'd really like it. There are some great characters in there. I'd like to see them McFarlane style...not all, but some of the more memorable ones.

In terms of the way games go together at Rare—do

they get made the conventional way or are you guys more free-form because of your background?

We're hacks at the end of the day. We just make it up as we go along. It's also about teamwork. There are a lot of talented people in the company, so it's down to the kind of direction everyone gets, I suppose. I'm absolutely certain we do it completely different than the Japanese do, and we tend to work with smaller teams than most companies. I mean, I hear about teams that are 60, 70 plus. We certainly don't have teams that big here.

Elsewhere there are 18-month lead times, and small budgets abound...having to do horrible things to make games.

We're given a lot of freedom, which is good. It worked pretty well with Nintendo and seems to be working with Microsoft as well. They let us do what we want pretty much... That's just the way it is; they just have to trust us. That's what worked with Nintendo and they recognize that so they're doing the same.

So you do all of the voices in the game? Does that come natural? I mean, there's a ton of comedy and characters in the game.

If you have a script, it comes out really wooden, really stilted...you've probably noticed in a lot of other games. So I just went in and said, "Well, I know what the task is; you've got this big poo monster in the level and Conker comes in and chucks cream corn out of his ass..." And we just completely ad-libbed it. So for every task you hear and every bit of speech, there's about two hours worth that's been chopped out because it didn't work. It was a combination of me possibly being able to act a little and [music composer/sound recorder] Robin [Beanland]'s skill as an editor to get all the crap I was spouting for an hour and try to make a minute's worth of sense out of it...it was a team effort at the end of the day. It was really down to us getting on together. There was no plan. It was like, "Oh shit, what are we doing now? Right, okay, blah, blah, blah, let's try that," and off we'd go. Two years later we had enough material for the game so it worked. I find it really intimidating to think about a sequel; to do all that again on my own wouldn't be feasible. Going back and seeing what we've done converting the game, we've become aware of what a task it was. I can't imagine how we ever got it done.

Now that's fur! Not to mention a wasp smoking a cigar.



RELOADED AND ONLINE

Moving on to the online portion of Conker: Live and Reloaded, which pretty much blew our minds during our hands-on time with the game, take any preconceived notions you may have had and cast them into a river of poop. The entire online treatment has been reworked since its initial E3 debut: there are now six multiplayer levels to explore (split between two eras: the Terminator-inspired Future War and the WWII-themed Old War) with each one boasting its own unique design and ambience, to be played either team-based, story-driven or as a highly configurable death match. In the Future War era, for instance, the scenario begins with the Battle of Toth, where Tediz and Squirrels are locked in mortal combat amidst fields of ice to secure parts of the Secret Plan, which culminates in the next area...Big Clucker, where it reveals the whereabouts of a

hidden alien artifact—namely a super weapon that the Tediz want and the Squirrels want to destroy. Once destroyed, things move to Return of the Panther King, where the destruction of the weapon has opened up an underground cavern where the Panther King lies frozen in a block of ice. Old War offers a similarly linked chain of events covering Beach, Urban and Heroes of Tadimark areas. And that's only a single aspect of the multiplayer venue.

Within the framework of these areas, you'll capture towers, carpet bomb, snipe, utilize air and ground vehicles and have at your disposal an array of characters and weapons that simply defy description, along with unlockable characters such as an all-star team...and maybe even the likes of Conker's babe Berri and that drunken post jockey, Scarecrow Birdy.

play: The way the online is tuned, it seems like players are in for some dicey exchanges—this is a game where you don't want to get caught off guard. The give-and-take given all of the different character classes and vehicles seems primed for some intricate battle strategies. Who hatched all this?

Chris Seavor: That was me again. Presumably you're aware of what we had at E3 last year?

Roger that; what lead to that going away and this new design emerging?

The response we got at E3. The first thing everyone said was: "These vehicles...you can't do anything with them, they're on rails." So we were like, "Right, better



MULTIPLAYER MADNESS

In multiplayer conflicts, players on either side of the Squirrel-Tediz wars will be able to choose from six character classes—Demolisher, Sky Jockey, Thermophile, Grunt, Sharp Shooter and Sneaker—with each offering unique weapons, abilities and modes of transportation (obtained from special vehicle spawn points). The Sky Jockey, for example, gets his own personal three-man jet that can carry teammates to distant locations or perform strafing runs; the Jedi-like Sneaker, in contrast, has stealth abilities, can play dead and wields a mean lightsaber.



"If there's a sequel, I'm certainly not short of ideas. There have been quite a few movies made in that time..."

—Chris Seavor, Conker creator

Vehicles are a big part of the online experience; plus, killer vermin on ATVs are just plain cool.

get some vehicles in..." So we went back to the drawing board. The other thing was that we had all of these types of characters. It looked like there were classes in the game and there wasn't. People were like: "This looks like a medic squirrel, why haven't I got any medical ability?" And then I thought, "Why don't we have classes?" I'm a big fan of games like Counter-Strike and lots of other games coming out now—there are tons and tons of games out there to inspire me—and I just thought, we can compete with these if we try, but we can also give it our own edge with the furry, swearing squirrels and the overkill with the gore, which we're going to really go for with this one, but we can also still kind of give it that sort of serious tone that I think it needs. The original multiplayer game was a bit of a throwaway thing. This is more serious. Like the battle career where there's actual experience in it. The more you play, the more you get out of it; you'll have rank and stuff like that. It's not a pick-up-and-play game...it's not the kind of game you just dip in. You can play it like that if you want, but if you're dedicated enough, there are advantages to playing over a long period of time. In a similar way to how EverQuest has levels...I mean, people are so obsessed with what level they are...and at the end of the day, we're doing the same thing. You've got your ranks and your medals and there are goals to give it longevity rather than going, "Right, I'm gonna kill some people."

And the balance is awesome...you've got players in the sky, vehicles and support on the ground, sharpshooters...imagining the teams you can put together and the way the matches are going to play out, you're going to really need to be on your toes and work as a team.

That'll be nailed, that will. I'm hoping what you'll get is something people will take seriously and actually play it for its own merits rather than go, "Oh, it's just Conker multiplayer." It's the emphasis of the game—it's the focus of it—it's not a sequel to Conker at all...this is Conker Live!

So you don't see online as a necessary evil? This is

where you really wanna go with the game...

This is what I want to do. I don't want to do any other games. Single-player games just on their own...I think have had their day because the enormous amount of work they are to do. I don't know if people appreciate that amount of work these days. Some of the reviews I see these days; I look at them and think, "Oh my god, I know how much work went into that game and it's getting slighted..."

You just hit on what we're all about...it is rampant. A lot of today's reviews read like a game cost a couple thousand bucks and took two months to make. It's very sad.

And there's nothing we can do about that. But I think the industry is moving forward and with the Live side of things, obviously, the Xbox gives us an opportunity to do stuff we can't really do on anything else, certainly not at the moment, except maybe PC, but that's still kind of a different thing.

Yeah...plus I don't wanna play with a keyboard and a mouse. Sorry; with Conker I can't do it...

No, yeah, fair enough. Me, I don't play single-player games. When I play at home, I play Live. I play PC games mainly...I play RPGs a lot and lots of shooting games. Single-player games are just getting a bit stale and stagnant because you're sort of within the limitations of what the programmer has done with his characters, but with Live you're against other people. It's such a completely different thing; it shouldn't be viewed, in my mind, as something additional. It should almost be the focus of the product. There's a lot more you can do with Live. It isn't just about people fighting, which is commonly what we're doing. If you develop it more, you can probably do a single-player game where all the baddies are not done by the programmer but are actually other people. That is ultimately the direction I wanna go with a game...try and bring the storyline into a Live environment. I haven't worked out how to do it yet but I'm absolutely positive you can somehow. Then you don't need your single-player game because it's there; you've

already got it...as long as you've got your user base; that's the thing. As long as there are people playing the Live game, it will work brilliantly.

I have this conversation all of the time. What you're talking about is what it's going to take to get people like myself playing online. People are waiting for the first real multiplayer action game where, say, one guy can jump farther so he makes the long jump and then reaches out for the heavier character who in turn protects him in battle and so forth...basically a big platforming universe. Opposing forces coming at each other... If you could achieve a Rare-style game inside an Xbox Live environment, I think you'd truly have the next big thing.

I think it's worth doing even if the audience might not be there for it. It's worth doing to try to push the boundaries because the industry is beginning to get a bit stale again. It's either first-person shooters or...even platformers are in need of some new ideas now.

The last kick we got was going 3D, and now things have run their course. A lot of great platformers that would have sold huge are tanking now. Look what GTA did for 3D action. Just by putting an edge on a free-from engine, it's made history. Imagine what Rare could do innovating on the platformer.

The problem is somebody actually having the balls to do it...you can't just go off and do it. You need a strong idea and it needs to be worked out. These things don't happen by accident. But somebody needs to make a point of saying, "Right! We gotta do this now, and balls to the consequences; let's see what we can do with it and take a risk!" Otherwise we'll just deteriorate into a bunch of realistic first-person games.

A bunch of movie games.

Yeah, exactly, yeah, and franchises.

Yep, running around with celebrities on the other end of my controller...

Yeah, that just really...that saddens me.



Well, you seem to be in the right place. Microsoft has the most powerful hardware, and seem open to innovation...
 Yep, well, hopefully...

Oh, and one more thing we're dying to know...what is Mepsipax?
 (laughs) Pepsi Max. Actually, it's an in-joke at Rare. There's a guy that works here in R&D with a beard... a big, massive beard...and Tim's nickname for him is Beardy; no, everyone's nickname for him is Beardy, and he became sort of the origin of Birdy, and he speaks exactly like Birdy speaks, and he drinks a lot of Pepsi Max, like 15 gallons a day... So we couldn't use Pepsi Max, so we used Mepsipax. So, it was just me taking a piss out of somebody I work with.

The mystery is solved. **play**





Tales of Symphonia

A gorgeous role-playing tale unfolds

Finally, RPG fans have something to look forward to on GameCube. Not that *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* or *Skies of Arcadia Legends* were anything less than great, but at last a traditional Japanese RPG, built from the ground up for Nintendo's machine, is set to arrive...and from all appearances, *Tales of Symphonia* is going to be a splendid way to waste 80 or so hours.

Following in the footsteps of *Tales of Destiny* and *Tales of Eternia* (*Tales of Destiny II* for U.S. gamers) on PSOne, *Tales of Symphonia* combines a beautiful fantasy setting and excellent character designs with an action-oriented battle system. As with the game's predecessors, battles in TOS actually let you take direct real-time control of your character, charging across the battlefield, guarding, slashing and unleashing a myriad of special techniques, while functions such as spells, items and the AI of your CPU-controlled teammates are handled via a menu. Players can switch to any active character at any time during combat, and all four team members can even join forces for one massive Unison Attack combo. Better yet, with the addition of extra controllers, four players can control the entire battle party. Namco also promises that there are more than 100 attacks and spells to learn, and by assigning various job titles and equipping characters with "EX Skills," players can determine how their characters will evolve and what new abilities they will learn.

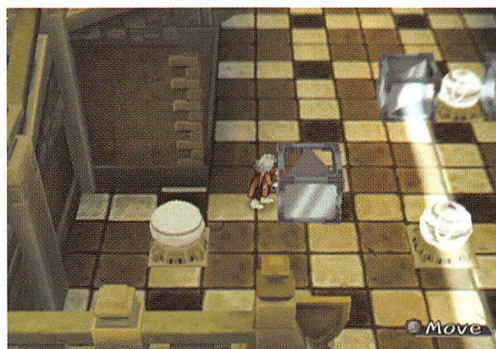
Symphonia's story revolves around the journey of Colette, the "Chosen of Regeneration." Out of all the people in the world of Sylvarant, it has fallen on the shoulders of Colette—a somewhat clumsy teenage girl from the village of Iselia—to undertake a mission to break the sacred seals and awaken the Summon Spirits, ultimately ascending to angelhood, thereby restoring Mana to the world and sealing away the Desians, a race of evil half-elves that raise humans as slaves. Accompanying Colette on her mission

are young swordsman Lloyd Irving, Colette's childhood friend and the game's main character; Genis, an Elvin magician and loyal friend to Lloyd and Colette; Raine, scholar and healer; and Kratos, a mercenary warrior. But the truth of Colette's ascension isn't as simple as good vs. evil; her quest for salvation may itself harbor something sinister, and the repercussions of her journey will affect the fate of two worlds.

In its previewable state, *Tales of Symphonia* already has a lot going for it, including great art direction, vibrant backgrounds, stunning sound effects and a talented vocal cast (featuring actors from *Metal Gear Solid*, *Teen Titans* and *Witch Hunter Robin*). Namco may very well have the next big role-playing experience on their hands.

Chris Hoffman

System: GameCube
Developer: Namco Tales Studio
Publisher: Namco
Available: July



"...her quest for salvation may itself harbor something sinister, and the repercussions of her journey will affect the fate of two worlds."

The action-packed *Tales* battle system now has 3D elements.

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PlayStation®2



Shin Megami Tensei Nocturne

In a world consumed by chaos, even the devil may cry

Life as we know it has ended. A cataclysmic event known as “the Conception” has occurred, literally turning the Earth inside-out, wiping out all of mankind save for a select few who have found holy sanctuary. Demons walk the lands; humans have been reduced to blue balls of energy that house their spirits. The forces that set these events in motion now vie for control over the future. Without a doubt, Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne is not a typical role-playing game.

Players find themselves cast in the role of one of the survivors of the Conception. Formerly an average high school boy, the main character now finds himself transformed into a tattooed, half-demonic form by the powers of Lucifer, the fallen angel, ruler of hell. Whether you side with Lucifer or against him is ultimately up to the player, but his gift of Magatama—the parasitic creature that bestows the demonic powers—is the key to strength and survival in this twisted new world. Throughout the game, players can find various types of Magatama and thus build up their character as they see fit.

But Magatama isn't the only road to power. As in Nocturne's sister series, Persona, you can communicate with the enemy demons in battle and persuade them to join you. With over 100 demon types, this provides vast options for party customization, and demons can even be fused together to create powerful new types.

Another innovation comes by way of the battle system. Although it plays much like a typical turn-based RPG, Nocturne features what is dubbed the “Press Turn Battle System,” meaning that you can gain or lose attacks depending on how well you fight. Hit an enemy with an attack they're weak against—lightning, for example—and your team will delay the enemy's turn and you'll get to issue another command. Choose an ability the enemy is immune to, and your turn may end prematurely. The strategic possibilities run deep.

If these features aren't enough to draw players into Nocturne's mature, occult-themed world, then perhaps there's one thing that can: Dante. Making a special appearance from Capcom's Devil May Cry series, Dante is loose in the Nocturne universe, kicking demon ass in a world gone mad. As with so many other aspects of the game, whether he's friend or foe is determined by the player's actions; yet one thing is certain: role-playing games just got a whole lot more interesting. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2

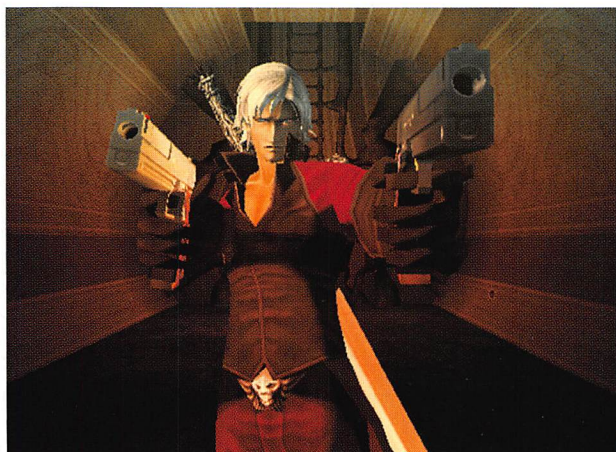
Developer: Research and Development 1

Publisher: Atlus

Available: Fall

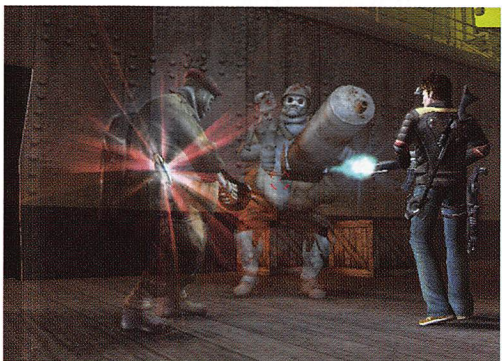


“Without a doubt, Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne is not a typical role-playing game.”



Twin guns, big sword, kick-ass attitude. Yep, that's Dante, all right.





As the credits rolled on Cambridge Studios' *Primal*, 2003's most underrated game, their next game, *Ghosthunter*, was revealed, already well underway, riding on an enhanced version of the *Primal* engine. Perhaps more shocking than the game's haunting visuals is the fact that for the first time since their initial PS game, *MediEvil*, SCEA isn't publishing, with the honors going instead to Namco. Given that the visuals surpass *Primal*'s—one of the best-looking PS2 games ever—and its more mainstream veneer, you'd think Sony would jump at the chance. I guess it's one strike and you're out over at the Sony camp.

The ghost busting gets underway when rookie Detroit cop Lazarus Jones and his partner Anna Steele stumble upon a paranormal research center while investigating a derelict high school and accidentally liberate a legion of poltergeists. A deadly spirit abducts Anna while another fuses with Lazarus, giving him a second sight—the ability to see dead people. A la *Ghostbusters*, it's up to Lazarus to save the girl and the world. Not exactly "War and Peace," but it'll get the job done. No word yet whether or not Zul or the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man will make the scene or if Lazarus will be carrying an unlicensed nuclear accelerator on his back. Gameplay-wise, there's more to *Ghosthunter* than meets the eye. Cambridge Studios have made a living innovating on themes and, staying true to their roots, they've rigged Lazarus with enough gadgets to bring ghost busting into a whole new era, using stealth, strategy and, of course, all out blasting to send assorted specters back from whence they came, traversing levels that range from sunken ships to Alcatraz-like prisons.

Given the power and physics of this engine, along with its pedigree and the visuals on display, *Ghosthunter* is one of 2004's top PS2 exclusive prospects, not to mention a potential smash hit for Namco. Hopefully they've

optioned a PS3 sequel. In lieu of a *MediEvil* resurrection, *Ghosthunter* is likely Cambridge's last chance to hit big with a PS2 brand. Hopefully the second time will be the charm.

Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: SCEA Cambridge Studios

Publisher: Namco

Available: August



"...they've rigged Lazarus with enough gadgets to bring ghost busting into a whole new era..."

Whatever happens next, it can't be good.

King of Fighters

Maximum Impact

Forget what you knew; this is the next generation of King of Fighters

King of Fighters is back...and this time, things are changing. The restraints are removed; the gloves are off. SNK is going all-out as they abandon the classic but rather dated Neo Geo technology, creating this all-new installment in KOF's 10-year legacy from the ground up for PlayStation 2, bringing one of gaming's most respected fighting series up to current spec. Say goodbye to old-school hand-drawn 2D; say hello to 3D visuals and a new style of gameplay.

What may be most shocking about King of Fighters: Maximum Impact is that the game eschews its trademark team-based battling in favor of more traditional combat. No teammates to bail you out, no strikers—just good, old-fashioned one-on-one fighting. Most likely, this is a good thing, as it allows SNK to concentrate on perfecting fighting in the third dimension while saving team-based mechanics for potential future installments. SNK hasn't yet revealed exactly how KOF: MI will play, but they have stated that it will build upon the franchise's excellent 2D gameplay while adding in 3D elements, making it feel like something of a hybrid between traditional KOF and Tekken.

One thing that isn't changing is that KOF: MI still brings together some of the greatest characters in fighting game history. Classic warriors will be returning, now rendered in glorious 3D, including Kyo, Terry Bogard, Mai, Ryo, Yuri, Ralf, Clark, Athena, Maxima, Seth, K' and Leona. New characters have naturally joined the fray as well, among them twin brothers Alba and Soiree (at least, they claim to be brothers; Alba looks a bit feminine to me), mysterious magic-using girl Mignon and the busty assassin Lien. The newcomers will take center stage in the storyline, which focuses on gang warfare in Southtown (of Fatal Fury fame), specifically on the roles of Alba and Soiree and their battle against the Mephistopheles gang and its leader, Duke. SNK promises that additional characters, both new and old, will be revealed as the game comes closer to completion.

Even though SNK's previous 3D offerings haven't always been up to par (Fatal Fury: Wild Ambition, anyone?), hopefully the company has learned from the past, allowing their legendary series to continue its grand tradition in a bold new direction. When KOF: Maximum Impact hits later this year, we'll find out.

Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: SNK

Publisher: SNK

Available: Fall 2004



"Say goodbye to old-school hand-drawn 2D; say hello to 3D visuals and a new style of gameplay."



Kyo has encountered Terry's Power Wave many times—but never quite like this.



Wild Arms

Alter code: F

Let me tell you a story...

Back in the untamed frontier era of video gaming, when RPGs still hadn't quite made it big in the U.S.—1997 to be precise—a rugged new game appeared for the Sony PlayStation. The game went by the name of Wild Arms, and although it had a familiar 16-bit look to it, it took players to places where few had ever been before. It enraptured gamers with its distinct Wild-West-meets-sci-fi motif and with its three unique main characters: Rudy, a young man who possessed the rare ability to use ancient gun-like weapons called ARMs; Cecilia, a princess who rejected her pedigree in exchange to make the world a better place via her magic; and Jack, the Han Solo of the team, a scruffy treasure hunter who traveled the world with his magical rodent companion, Hanpan. Wild Arms further impressed players through its deep magic system, weapon customization options and the merging of traditional RPG elements with the use of tools, such as bombs and a grappling hook, which let the characters interact with their environments and solve puzzles in a way that can only be compared to the classic Legend of Zelda games. And who could forget the beautiful animated intro with its haunting whistled melodies? Though two sequels followed in its footsteps, neither one quite had the magic of the original Wild Arms.

But now, more than seven years later, the tale of the original Wild Arms is back, enhanced with new elements, updated for the PlayStation 2. The legend is returning in the form of Wild Arms: Alter code: F.

Alter code: F offers more than just completely revamped visuals. Certainly, the sprite-based graphics have been replaced by fully 3D characters and environments, featuring the same subtle crayon-style shading that worked so well in Wild Arms 3, but the actual locales have been completely redesigned to take advantage of the third dimension, while CG cutscenes punctuate the game's pivotal moments. New plot twists and new tools have been added too.

The battle system has also changed. Borrowing elements from Wild Arms 3, the fights are now more dynamic, a Vitality Gauge provides limited health restoration after each battle, and random battles can be avoided with timed button presses. Most significantly, the playable cast has more than doubled, with a total of six party members in battle at once. Joining Rudy, Cecilia and Jack on their quest are supporting cast members Emma the archaeologist, bounty huntress Calamity Jane, Jane's servant Magdalen (known as McDullen in the original U.S. Wild Arms), wealthy Mariel and even the villainous Zed.

Although Alter code: F may not be as flashy as some of the other RPGs coming to PlayStation 2 this year, there's no doubt it will be just as captivating, if not more so. If Agetec can work out some of the rough edges of the Japanese version (a default camera that's pulled too far out, the run and action commands assigned to the same button), Wild Arms: Alter code: F could go down as a classic. Oh yeah...and that haunting whistled intro? It's back. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Media Vision/SCE
Publisher: Agetec
Available: Q4 2004



Emma, now one of the game's playable characters, can download enemy skills.



“But now, more than seven years later, the tale of the original Wild Arms is back...”

McFarlane's Evil Prophecy

Plastic explosive

Given what it takes to get an original game made these days, McFarlane's *Evil Prophecy* is a good example of how much leverage the spawn of *Spawn* has amassed, especially considering that the past two *Spawn* games have pretty much sucked. Imagine showing up at Konami with a design document about a team-based beat-'em-up featuring a roid-gobbling pirate, a punchy scientist, a token blonde and Akuji's voodoo child...yeah, that's gonna happen. But alas, it has been fashioned into a game featuring monsters from the McFarlane pride, as if they actually deserve a game based on them. There's no doubt that McFarlane is the king of his craft, but as character designs go, these aren't exactly groundbreaking (or his best), leaving us with a passable-looking action brawler with an adventure spirit and a reputable pedigree. Not necessarily a bad thing, but not exactly Earth-shattering either. Why not design a game around *Manga Spawn* or *Medieval Spawn*? Imagine the adventure Konami could fashion from that fantastic plastic. Why this game at this juncture?

Evil Prophecy is just so hackneyed: four adventurers (one to four can play) to toggle at will, fighting through wave after wave of level-indigenous monsters, while unraveling rudimentary puzzles in order to progress...not exactly brimming with next-level charm. Depth comes by way of experience, as you repeat combos to gain strength, and trite, mostly ill-conceived events that leave nothing to the imagination. "Perhaps we can use the monster's tools to dig for the map." Gee, I wondered why there were five pickaxes on the ground just then...and of course they mark where to dig on the map as well. Artificial length is nothing new to the genre, but that doesn't make it any less tired. These days we need a damn good reason to wade through wave after wave of monsters no matter how cool they look. Games that rely on visceral action need perfect tuning and fast, fluid gameplay to hit the mark, and the jury is still out



on whether McFarlane's latest prophecy will come true. The opening animation and pyrotechnics are certainly up to par, some of the later missions show promise, and the bosses are pretty badass, but in its previewable state, the characters feel a bit disconnected and they've been cursed with that odd jumping anomaly where the ground seems to dip as the characters rise—a funky old engine glitch I presumed long ironed out.

If Konami can work out the kinks, *Evil Prophecy* could

shape up to be a first-class brawler, but it could just as easily go in the tank. I wonder if the three strikes rule applies to Todd? Maybe he gets six. At this rate he just might need 'em. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Hawaii
Publisher: Konami
Available: June



Where there's smoke...how do you like your werewolf?



"If Konami can work out the kinks, *Evil Prophecy* could shape up to be a first-class brawler, but it could just as easily go in the tank."



Death by Degrees

And you thought Tekken was brutal

Successfully applying a layer of innovation over the first-person action game with Breakdown, Namco's now shifting to the third-person landscape for another genre shake-up. At the center of the conflict is Tekken's indomitable female assassin, Nina Williams, who draws on her familiar range of devastating martial arts moves while relying on several new weapon-based attacks to plow through a crushing wave of terrorists.

Death By Degrees takes place before the first King of Iron Fist Tournament, beginning on a cruise ship where Nina is forced to enter an underground fighting contest held by a powerfully corrupt organization known as the Kometa.

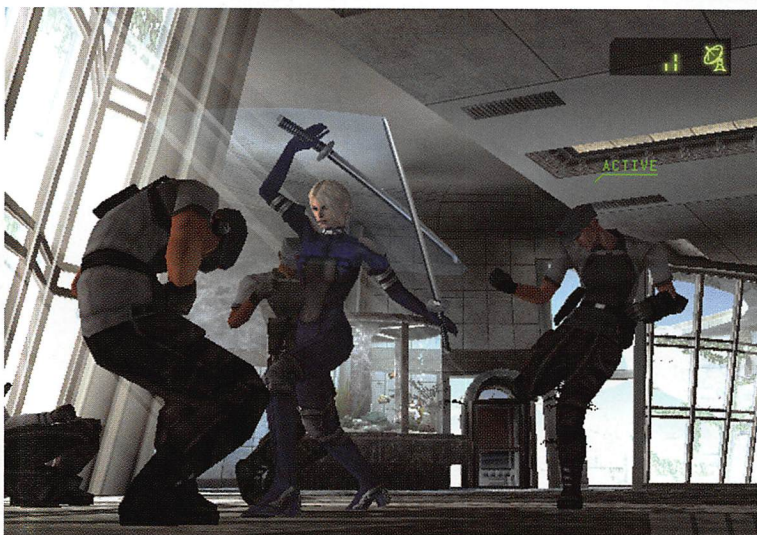
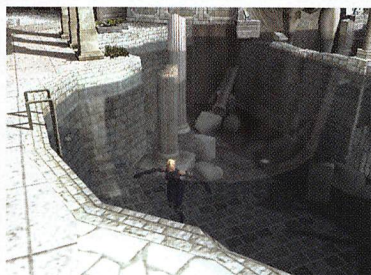
When a fellow comrade goes missing, Nina gets entangled in an escalating plot that involves the Kometa's control of a destructive weapon called the Salacia. As the game heats up, straight brute force takes center stage, but navigating Death By Degrees' 140 compartments will sometimes require a little careful sneaking—hide behind walls and pillars, circumvent traps, apply sleeper holds and capture finger prints for cracking restricted areas.

When broken bones are the only way ahead, Nina can charge up a Focus Gauge attack, which casts an x-ray view of the victim's insides, revealing the pressure points and exploding impact of a devastating blow. Interestingly, some of the complex moves that radiate over a 360 degree field will involve the use of the right analog stick, and as your proficiency increases, experience points and new attacks become the necessary reward.

It's certainly worth mentioning that Tekken veterans are involved in the creation of Death by Degrees. The days of accepting a rigid Dynamite Deka/Final Fight setup for the beat-'em-up are long gone, so don't for a second hold onto the possible comparison. This game is striving for some cool new angles, and an involved approach to storytelling is being fashioned to work within the action. Add in over an hour of CG cinemas, handled by Shirogumi Inc., which also worked on Resident Evil Zero and Onimusha 2, and you've got another Namco bid for action success.

Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: October 2004



Nina lays down the law with short- and long-range attacks.

"...Namco's now shifting to the third-person landscape for another genre shake-up."



MGS

Metal Gear Solid Snake Eater

Metal Gear Solid gets up close and personal

3



As Hideo Kojima's highly anticipated Metal Gear Solid 3 gets further into development, Konami continues to reveal tantalizing new tidbits about one of 2004's most impressive-looking games.

Amidst the latest smattering of info: hints about some of the game's characters. In storyboard sequences, the heavily bearded main character can be seen wearing an eyepatch, providing further evidence that MGS3's incarnation of Snake may indeed be Big Boss, the genetic blueprint for Solid Snake. Also prominently featured in the storyboards is a female character possibly named Eva. Although her role hasn't yet been revealed, she appears to be a soldier herself, and likely a love interest for the hero. Don't worry though—Kojima has gone on record saying that the story will play a much smaller part than it did in MGS2.

Konami has also demonstrated the new fighting system implemented in MGS3. Called Close Quarter Combat (CQC), the technique is a real-world fighting tactic that combines bare hands, knives and gun maneuvers to counter, disarm and dispatch multiple opponents.

"CQC is a high-level professional tactic," explained

Motosada Mori, military advisor for the Metal Gear series. "Not necessarily does it work to your advantage if anyone uses it. Only when you have mastered fighting with knives and guns does it become an advantageous tactic. Someone who has no experience with weapons will injure him/herself if he/she uses this kind of knife. Only special forces personnel in the real world and Snake in MGS3 who are 'amazing' can use this technique."

When equipped with a CQC knife, "Snake" will be able to reverse enemy attacks from behind, efficiently knock enemies unconscious or take an enemy hostage, using him as a shield. Additionally, the CQC moves should look authentic thanks to the use of extensive motion capture.

"In MGS3, we have kept in mind at all times the use of CQC," Mori said. "Not only the posture of the character and how you throw the enemy, but also how you walk and keep an eye on things around you is based on CQC. I think fans will be able to enjoy this." **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: Q4 2004

"In MGS3, we have kept in mind at all times the use of CQC."

—Motosada Mori, Military Advisor, Metal Gear Solid series



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Scene Num		M480_010_P010									
Scene Title		デモ 48									
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49		「え？」 「顔がそこにある」									
50		「あなたを待っている……」									
51		「俺を待っている？」									
1		サイドカーを降りる									
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47		横しく抱き止める									
48		2人両面ミルエクトに送いくらい T・B									
49		振り出しの中抱き合う2人 雨が小ぶりになり始める									
50		フカン 爆発のため影が長い 影、残つち重なっている									
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As you can see in the storyboard sketches above, the man called Snake has a beard and an eyepatch. Is this how Big Boss got his distinctive look?



CQC

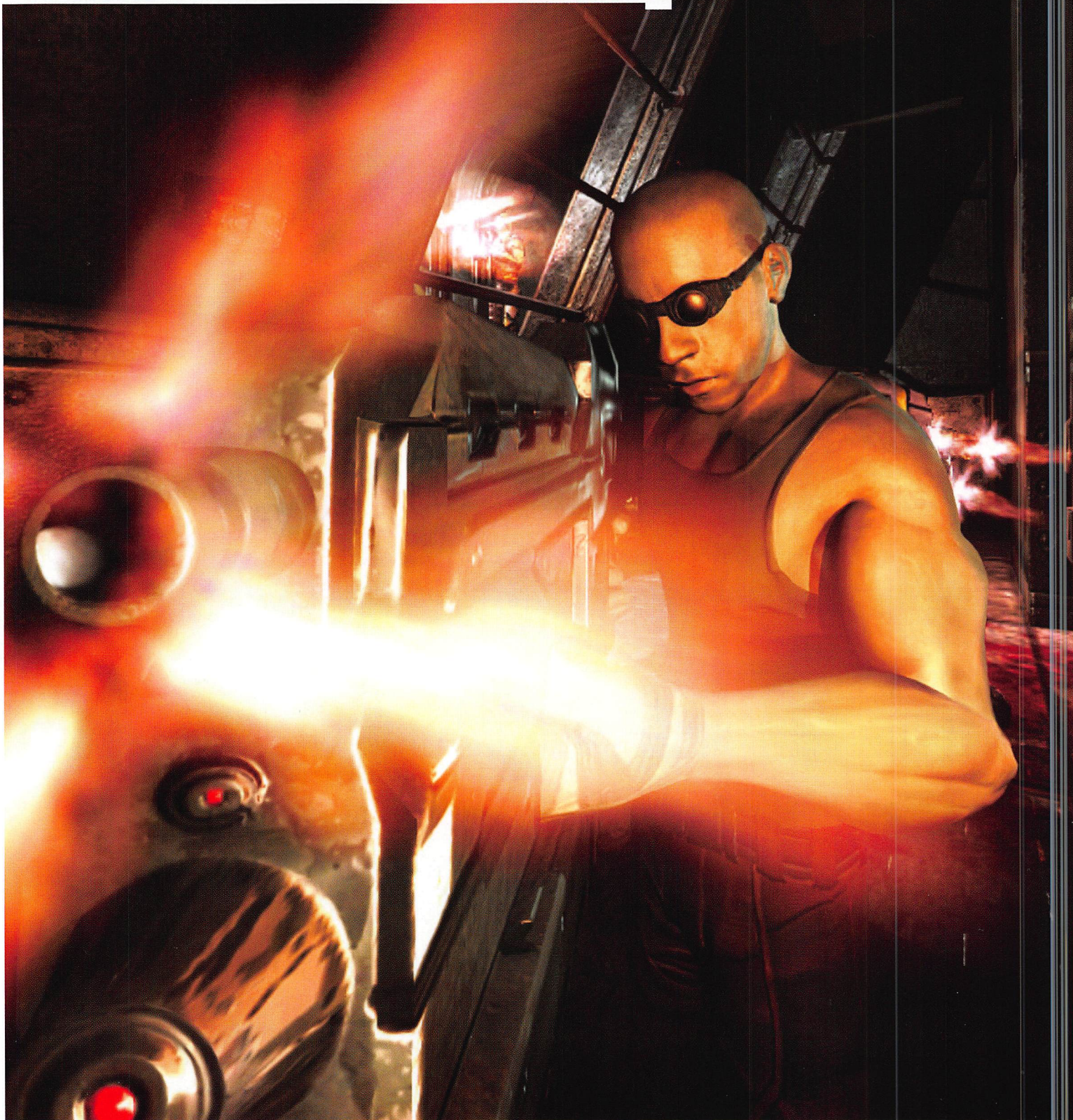
Close Quarter Combat

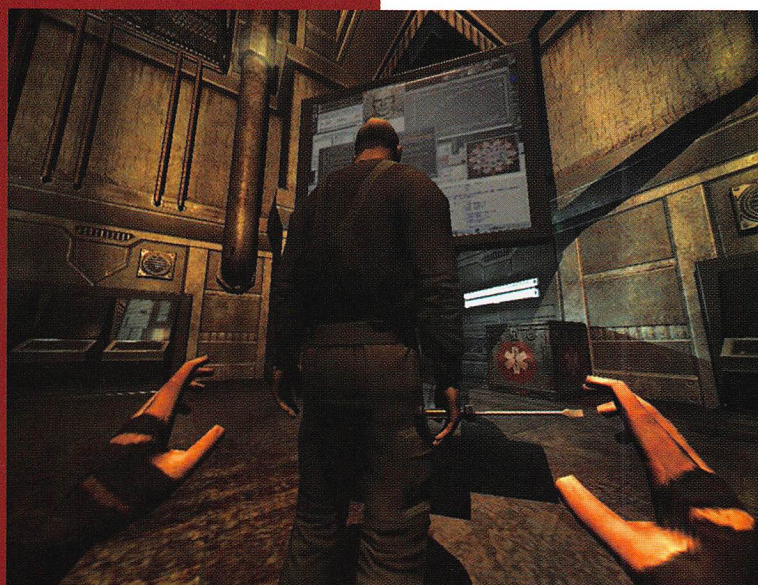
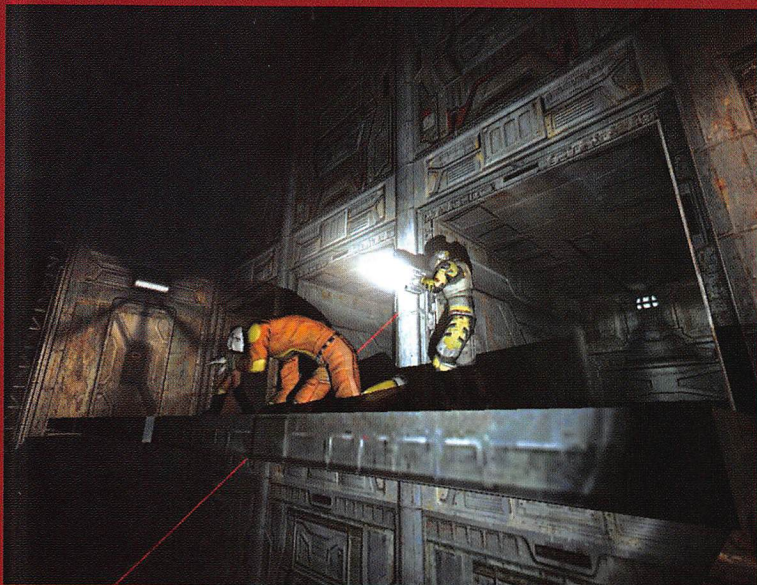
This sequence of screenshots demonstrates Close Quarter Combat in action. Note how Snake forces his enemy to the ground with his right leg before taking him out.

The Chronicles of Riddick

Escape from Butcher Bay

Diesel powered first-person milestone





Please excuse me while I remove my foot from my mouth... Just last month I was going on about how much I disliked controlling real actors, rolling press just days before Riddick would prove the notion sound under the right circumstances.

The first game to get it right—really right—is the product of two very important things: A) an actor who truly personifies *cool* and *action hero* (and nothing else) in Vin Diesel and B) technology that makes him look and feel remarkably realistic and alive in the game. Together with a vocal performance Diesel obviously took to heart, *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* is as close to the real deal as movie gaming has ever come. If the film is even close to as-good, I'll forgive Mr. D for ditching the flawed but potentially super cool anti-Bond, xXx.

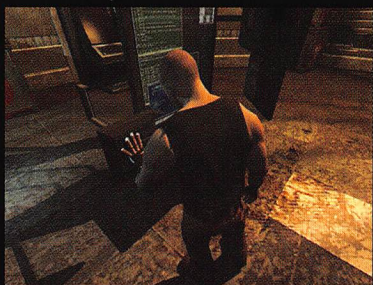
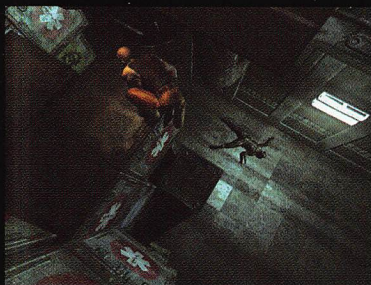
Feeding off the raspy low-pitched voice that captivated so many in *The Iron Giant*, within a dark and astonishingly depicted stone and metallic gamescape and the best first-person portrayal perhaps ever, the immersion level in Riddick is nothing short of extraordinary. The first-person view is somewhat of a cross between Namco's recently released *Breakdown* (where you can see your appendages realistically), a third-person game and a traditional FPS. Crouched, as you come to a resting position, Riddick props his arms up on his knees like a living extension of the player, as he does walking, shooting or choking out a victim. Elsewhere, shooting is pure FPS, while grappling, interacting with fixtures and climbing trigger a zoom to reveal a stunning third-person view. All this as you traverse the best-looking first-person graphics this side of *Doom 3*, amidst story-driven action that plays like a cross between *Splinter Cell* and *Half-Life*. Every last detail, from intimate confrontations (the melee is superb, complete with disarming moves and counters) to dragging limp corpses into hiding to real-time dialogue, is as close to real as you can get, making the likes of *Deus Ex: Invisible War* look dated. Through a process called Normal Mapping, complex models and textures

that would choke current hardware specs are created, copied and then pasted onto simple polys, resulting in the illusion of the original hi-res art, the end result of which is nothing short of stunning. You'd swear you were looking at God's gift to bump mapping on both the environments and the characters, but the frame rate is buttery smooth—a grand illusion indeed.

While there's a bit of polishing yet to be done before the game is complete, you can rest assured that Vin Diesel gives a shit about any game that bears his name, Tigon is no joke, and Starbreeze is the real deal—a true force in next-level gaming. After *Enclave* and now this, I officially worship the ground they code on. Dave Halverson

System: Xbox
Developer: Starbreeze
Publisher: VU Games
Available: June

"...The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay is as close to the real deal as movie gaming has ever come."



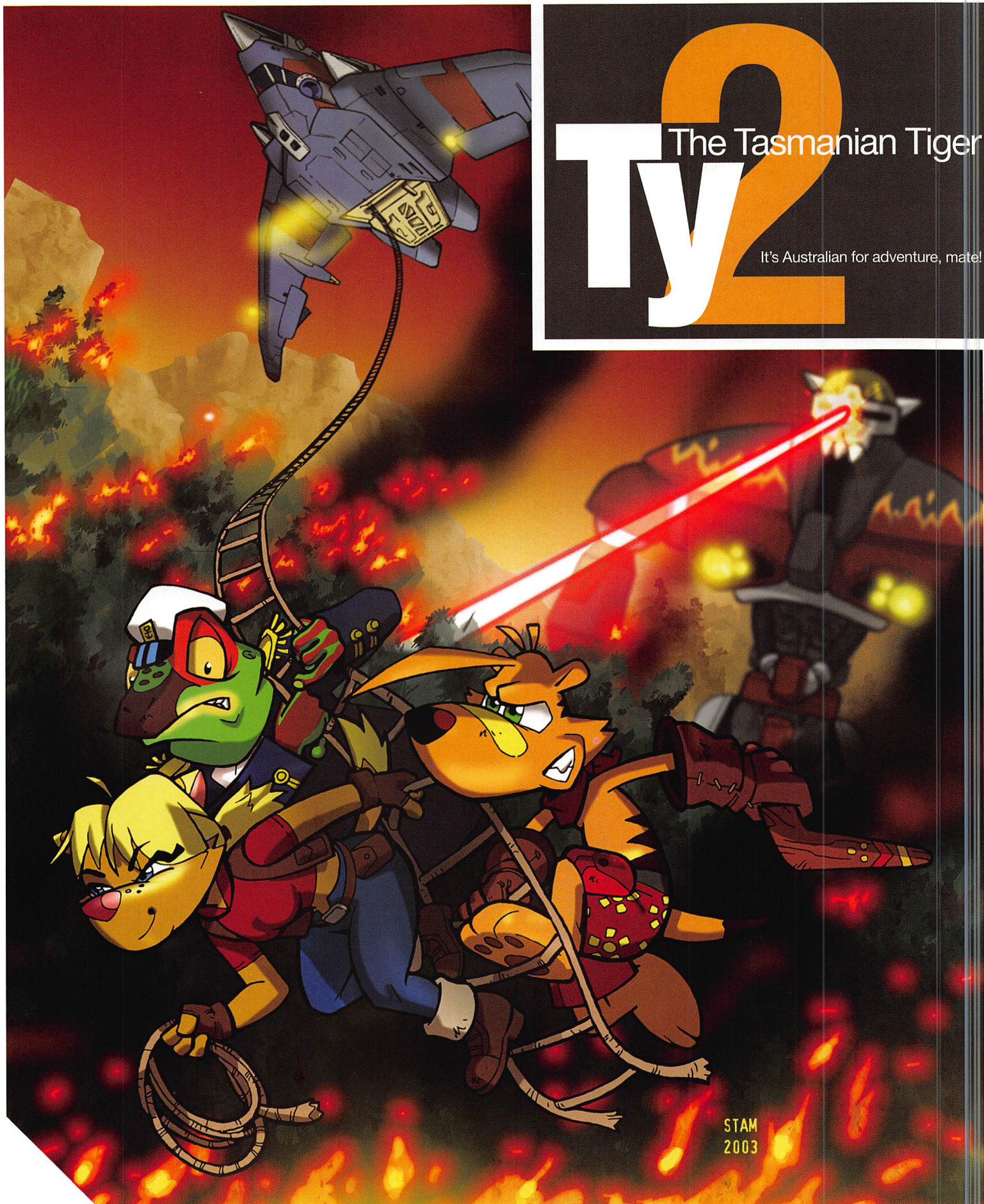
Normal mapping in action:
 Riddick is the best-looking
 movie game to date.



Ty2

The Tasmanian Tiger

It's Australian for adventure, mate!



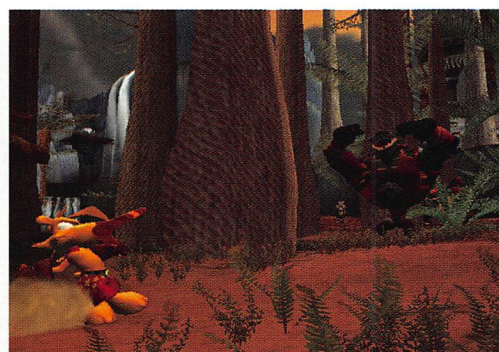
STAM
2003

Let's face it, Ty the Tasmanian Tiger didn't exactly set the world on fire...or did he? Can you say a million plus sold and counting? I knew I wasn't crazy! While the rest of the world hammered away at the little guy (so he looks more like a hairy midget dog surfer in oversized OPs than a tiger; big deal), I saw a vast and highly enjoyable platformer for all ages, and got loads of mail thanking me for the nod. Obviously, Ty caught fire after the press died down, ultimately spawning the sequel (and likely much, much more) that would land EA and the Krome guys (fresh from Australia) in our cozy conference room for a first hands-on look. As my cohorts looked on, ever puzzled by my jubilation over yet another critter game, the new face of Ty took shape.

In a word, Krome is going "epic" this time out, doing away with the central hub by taking elements akin to Jak II (a massive central city, Burrumudgee, serves as the game's way-point) and adding a far more diverse assortment of play mechanics as Ty endeavors to beat down Boss Cass (he's busted out of jail and gone on a maniacal tirade) and

his army of reptiles once again. I'm not sure whether the world is quite ready for Aussie mechs or not, but they're coming in all of their anime-style glory, looking like a cross between a Gundam and one of Zion's assault suits. Who knew that the character designer on Ty was an anime and manga fanatic? Elsewhere, driving and flying puzzles, along with better kart racing than you'll find in most dedicated games and levels so large you need to drive across them, are the name of the game, along with, of course, more platforming than you can shake a wallaby at, utilizing 21 upgradeable boomerangs to beat down Cass's army. The one area of the game that did need improvement—collecting opals to escape levels and amass 'rangs—has been suitably re-tooled. Now the game's currency, opals are used for trading, upgrading weapons and the like.

The only area of the new mix that concerns me is how fretful the Krome brain trust were over how the 7- to 12-year-old demographic views the game. Whenever anyone says that dying in a video game is a detriment, I get scared. Two things: 1) kids rock at eye-hand, and 2) they want

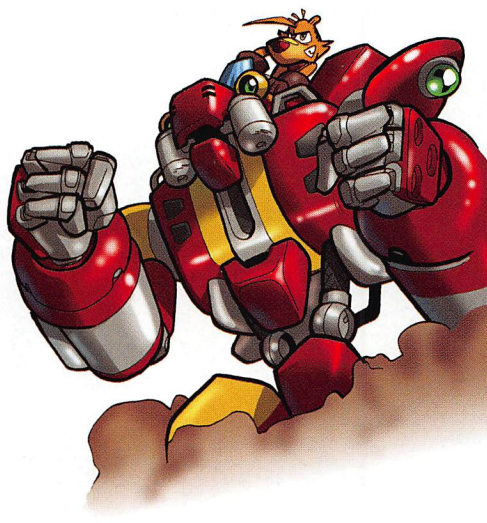


nothing to do with the critter games of the world. Any 9-year-old will tell you that GTA is what his or her dreams are made of. Talk about Ty Tiger in school and get beat up; talk about GTA and move up. As wrong as that is (and is it ever), until parents wake up and smell the violence, that's the fact. The day of the dark platformer (not "mature," but dark) needs to dawn—not just for the sake of the gamers that grew up playing them but for a generation of kids that are more savvy and aware than ever. Krome say they'll appease both. Here's to hoping they can deliver. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: Krome
Publisher: EA
Available: Fall

It's a known fact that only Tasmanian tigers can swing from trees.

"In a word, Krome is going 'epic' this time out...and adding a far more diverse assortment of play mechanics..."



Sega E3 Special

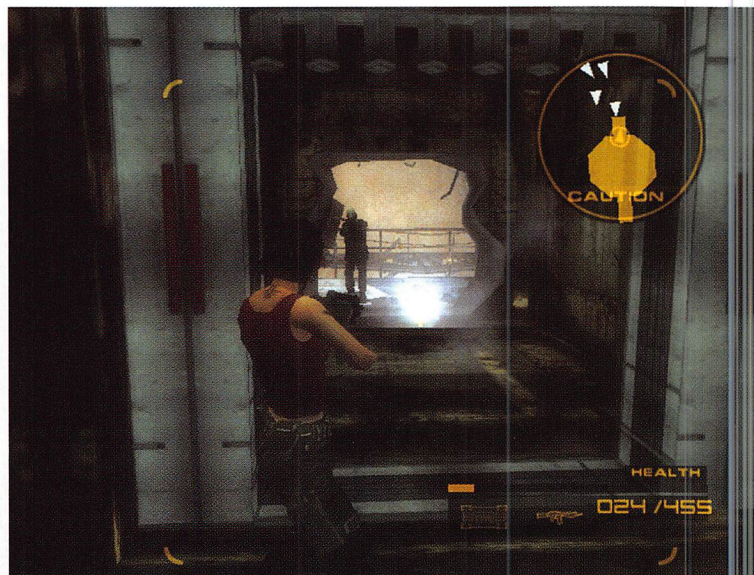
A more mature Sega prepares its new line-up



Otogi 2

Otogi: Myth of Demons was one of From Software's better games—a distinctly Japanese action experience that really should be played by anyone who remembers what fun gameplay used to be all about—and here comes the sequel, a similarly staged but vastly reworked trek through a mystical Japan. Hero Raikoh returns, joined by five other warriors, each with their own set of unique attacks and important attributes. Surprisingly, the originally fantastic engine has been scrapped for even more of an emphasis on environmental physics and rich shading. **Brady Fiechter**

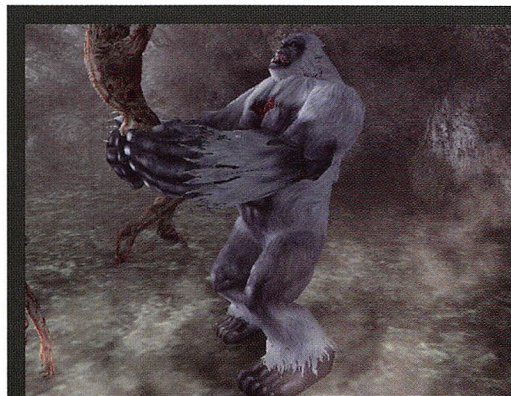
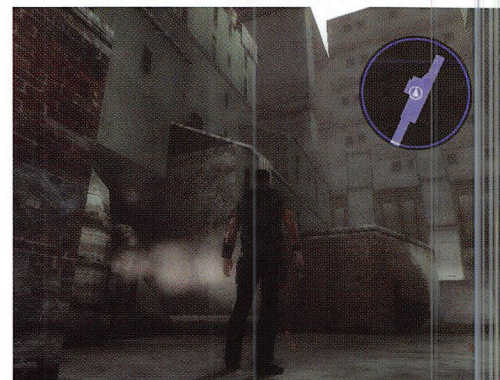
System: Xbox
Developer: From Software
Publisher: Sega
Available: Winter



Headhunter: Redemption

It's been 20 years since the Bloody Mary Virus decimated civilization. A new society has emerged, defined by the corporate- and media-driven wealthy of the Above and the squalor of the Below. The world is basically on the verge of collapse, but Headhunter Jack Wade and his young helper, Leeza X, work to bring some sort of order by tracking the cream of the criminal crop. Action and killing and shooting ensues. **Brady Fiechter**

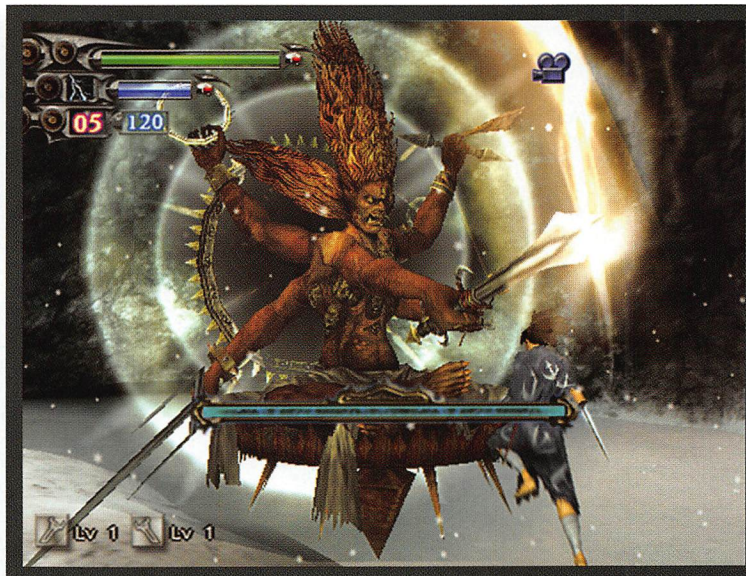
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Amuze
Publisher: Sega
Available: Summer



Altered Beast

The name says it all: the modern-day update to the Sega arcade classic. Apparently there's been a "deadly genetic outbreak" causing some nastiness in a quaint West Coast community. And when there's a deadly genetic outbreak, the military, of course, must be involved. Infected, you're able to transform into such creatures as a minotaur, dragon and werewolf, heading off to mutilate other genetic freaks. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: WOW Entertainment
Publisher: Sega
Available: Fall



Virtua Quest

Balancing heavy exploration and character growth with a complex fighting engine, Virtua Quest is an action-RPG set in a simulated world that's being infiltrated by the Judgment 6. The hero is a boy named Sei, who roams the area looking for Virtua Souls—information vials that contain detailed information on the martial arts moves of the Virtua Fighter characters. Sei uses the knowledge he acquires in an effort to quell the malevolent Judgment 6. **Brady Flechter**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube

Developer: AM2

Publisher: Sega

Available: Q4 2004

Blood Will Tell

The tortured samurai Hyakkimura has lived a life of unimaginable struggle. As a newborn, his body was mutilated to the point that every limb, organ—even his flesh—was lost. Now he is on a mission to regain his humanity, one brutal deathblow at a time. Based on Osamu Tezuka's classic manga, Blood Will Tell, Hyakkimura's plight is unrestrained in its graphic intensity: the personal redeemer has blades where his arms used to be, a bazooka lodged inside what used to be his legs. Other weapons are found along the way and concealed in the most unlikely of places for the kill. Along the way, Hyakkimura's long-time friend Dororo accompanies him in his search for the answers to his past. Throughout the game, puzzles and other obstacles require teamwork for circumvention; if you desire a friend along for the ride, they can control Dororo for cooperative play. With the entire Blood Will Tell framework built off Tezuka's manga, this one's as dark and bizarre as they come. **Brady Flechter**

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: WOW Entertainment

Publisher: Sega

Available: Winter

Spikeout: Battle Street

Ten years after the original turf wars began heating up, the legendary Team Spike is now led by the original leader's son, Spike Jr., who vows to eliminate Team Inferno. The big deal here is Xbox Live play, where up to 16 brawlers can battle it out in a gang-infested world. Tons of downloadable stuff includes characters, stages, new items to decorate your thug and much more. **Brady Flechter**

System: Xbox

Developer: Amusement Vision

Publisher: Sega

Available: Winter



Sega Super Stars

Sega's getting into the EyeToy scene with Sega Super Stars, a collection of 15 games pulled from the Sega universe. You'll battle Virtua Fighter characters and shred on a snowboard with Sonic. If you're into music, make some noise with the Samba de Amigo instruments. Super Monkey Ball will also make an appearance, offering you a mini-game of banana collection. **Mutsumi Yasuda**

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Sonic Team

Publisher: Sega

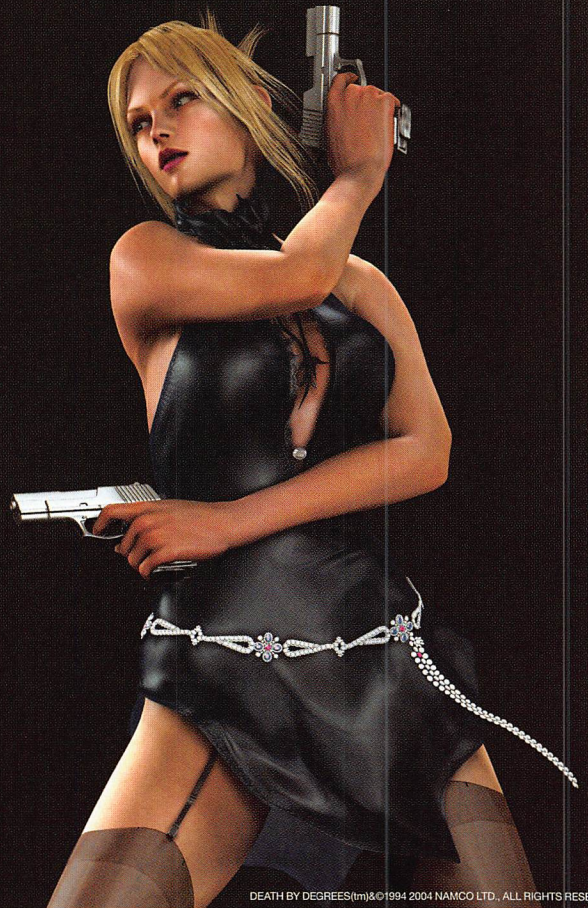
Available: Fall



Here they come again...

Girls of Gaming v.2

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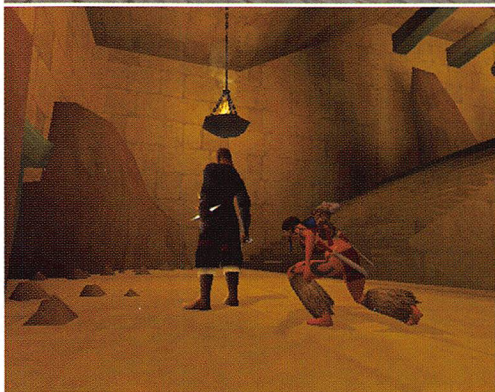
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Rise of Kasai (working title)

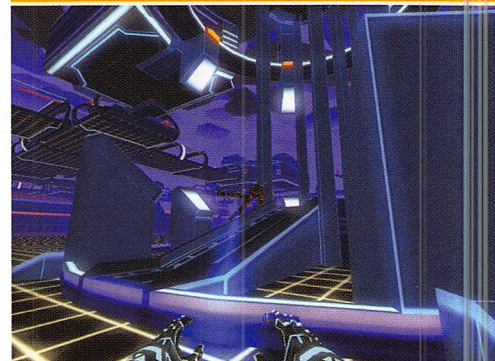


Beginning 10 years prior to the events of The Mark of Kri, then leaping ahead to 10 years after, Rise of Kasai will employ a similar yet improved analog battle system with the ability to stealth kill or face up to nine opponents at once. You'll also be choosing between Rau and his younger, more agile sister, Tati, journeying through 10 levels of beautiful, lush terrain, on their way to discovering the truth about the family's dark secret and the origins of the Kasai. On par with the first, the emphasis has again been placed on artistry, an engaging storyline and a world of dark magic, discovery and conflict. -DH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Bottlerocket
Publisher: SCEA
Available: Q1 2005



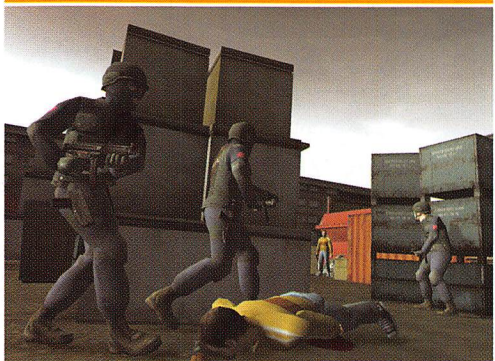
TRON 2.0: Killer App



Wisely consigned to Climax's Los Angeles studio for conversion, TRON 2.0: Killer App will feature new exclusive Xbox Live multiplayer combat, along with an enhanced version of the amazing FPS/adventure that won it top honors as one of 2003's best PC games. Digitizing players into the world of a degenerating computer system on the verge of collapse from a seemingly unstoppable army of corrupt programs lead by the evil "user" Thorne, it's use or be used as you face off against security forces and legions of horribly mutated programs. Sounds like a killer app. -DH

System: Xbox
Developer: Climax America
Publisher: Buena Vista
Available: Fall

The Getaway 2



The first Getaway rode on some good ideas that just weren't strong enough to keep the game on course. But the potential was big for a gritty good time, which is why this sequel comes with fine anticipation. A fastidiously accurate London is again the setting, spreading the violence across driving stretches and third-person shootouts. The game maintains a good deal of the look and feel of before, taking place a few years later and featuring a handful of returning characters. Of the two new playable leads, one has been revealed: Eddie O'Conner, a weathered boxer who also bounces to pay the bills. -BF

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Studio Soho
Publisher: SCEA
Available: December

Crimson Tears



In Capcom's gorgeous new cel-shaded dungeon crawl, Crimson Tears, you choose from three "biological war weapons" (humanoids Amber, Kadie and Tokio) and take to the complex mazes of A.R.M.A. (the weapons manufacturer that built them) while facing off against enemy hordes via martial arts melee skills and limited munitions while investigating a mysterious disaster that's crippled the city. We've played this one extensively, and basically, if you like dungeon crawls, this is one of the better, more nuanced ones we've seen in quite some time; looks awesome too. -DH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: July

Under the Skin



When residents of Planet Trick turn three, they're sent to a different galactic star for "trick training" and aren't allowed to return home until they've reached mischief maturity. Of all the concepts we've heard over the past few years, Under the Skin is without a doubt one of the freakiest: a tale about mischievous aliens who traverse the galaxy, shape-shifting into the people they meet in order to pull pranks and create chaos and panic. Capcom's resident alien Cosmi has chosen the farthest and most dangerous planet to wreak havoc on...Earth. Lots o' luck; we're doing a pretty good job on our own. -DH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Fall



Kingdom Hearts II



It's been two years since the events in the original, but much in the world of Kingdom Hearts remains the same—Sora is still seeking his lost friends Riku and Kairi, while Donald and Goofy still search for King Mickey. Once again, the crossover between the rich Square Enix and Disney universes creates mass appeal, with new worlds and new characters featured, including Mickey himself, FF X's Auron and unnamed characters from FF X-2. But the story is now darker: the Heartless have also returned, and a mysterious masked villain has appeared, perhaps concealing a face from adventures past. -CH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: TBA

Crash Twinsanity



Crash and long-standing nemesis Dr. Neo Cortex must put their differences aside and work as a team in this latest installment in the classic Crash Bandicoot series. While Crash and the Doc work as one, Nina Cortex will also show up to help out in the cause to save the world. A lot of the enemies you face will be new to the series; they work in packs, run away if outmanned and are even being worked to exhibit a range of personalities. A lot of emphasis is also being placed on interactive environments and physical realism. -BF

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: VU Games
Publisher: Traveller's Tales
Available: Q3

Spyro: A Hero's Tail



Spyro's not the only one out to save the world. Give a warm welcome to returning friends Hunter the Cheetah (he's a good weapons guy), Sgt. Byrd (he's the dive-bombing penguin), Sparx the Dragonfly (fans will know him as the sidekick) and Blinky the Mole (he's a mole who digs and is good at getting to high places). Spyro's got some new moves, like the water breath attack and the always-helpful ledge grab, and his enemies are showing new faces. In an interesting twist, the setting will change from evil to good, somehow manipulating everything around. -BF

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Eurocom
Publisher: VU Games
Available: Q4 2004

Full Metal Alchemist and the Broken Angel

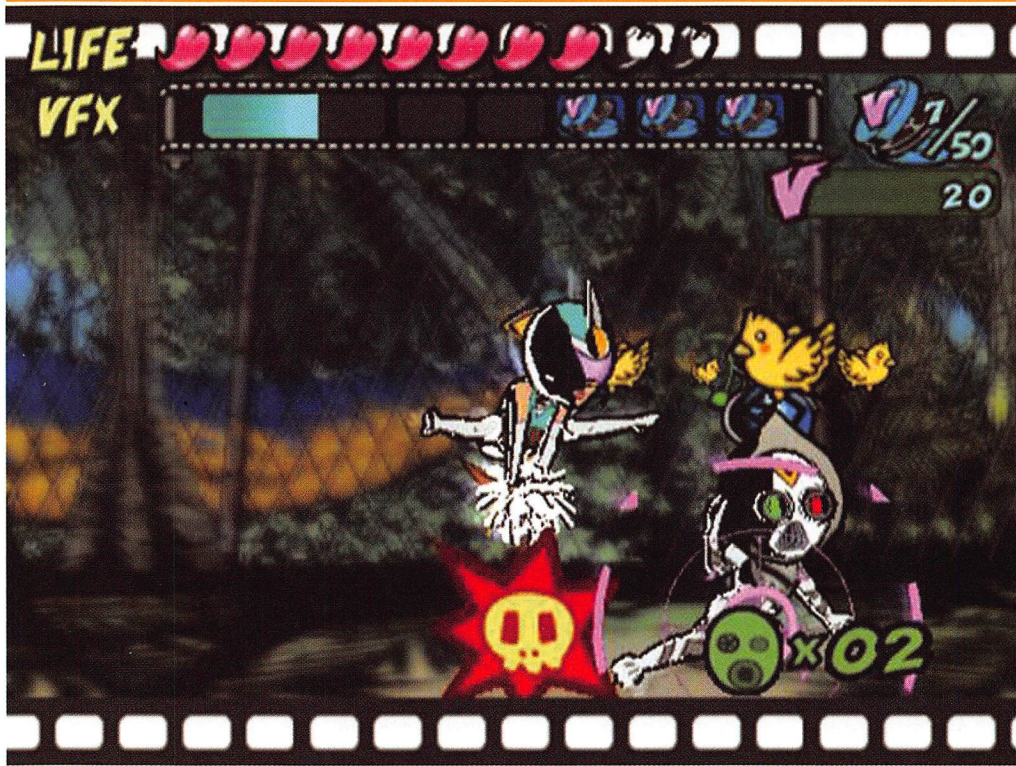


It's a glorious event when a much-anticipated anime series is accompanied by a game, let alone of the Square Enix variety. And this is no lame card battle or token fighter but a full-on action-RPG wrapped in one of the darkest anime tales in recent memory, about genius alchemist Edward Elrich and his younger brother, Alphonse, who attempt to resurrect their dead mother and end up paying with their appendages. Lovely stuff indeed. Using Weapon Alchemy and other fighting techniques, Edward and Alphonse set out on adventure to reclaim their original forms as their fates intertwine with the Pandora's box they've opened. -DH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Racjin Co.
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: 2005

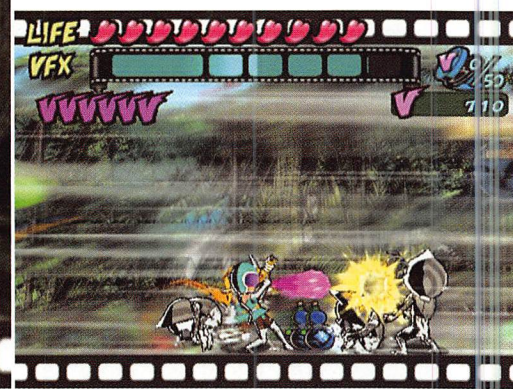


Viewtiful Joe 2



It's almost time to get our Henshin-a-go-go on once again—only this time with the ability to play as the bold, brash and totally big-headed Silvia! Armed with her pompoms and a projectile weapon, Silvia is playable from the get-go in this all-new adventure through diorama-tastic new environments like a jungle, underground ruins, ancient Japan, snowy mountains and outer space. The Six Machine has been juiced too—now with six variations, including a racer, cannon, drill and submarine—along with Joe and Silvia's vigorous moves that, in addition to Slow, Mach Speed and Zoom In, now feature Replay VFX power. -DH

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Winter



Final Fantasy XII



Final Fantasy XII takes us to the Final Fantasy Tactics world of Ivalice—a culturally diverse place of ancient technology and warring mythos, where enormous airships dominate travel and become deadly tools for battle. It is here where players will meet a young pilot hopeful named Vaan, who sets the adventure in motion while becoming friends with the downtrodden Princess Ashe. Other new characters recently revealed by Square include air pirate Balfear and Pannero, possibly Vaan's girlfriend. The FF games have always been gorgeous affairs, and it is interesting that this latest world, built on a new engine, is comprised of half the polygons. -BF

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Square Enix (Production Development Division 4)
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: 2005

Street Fighter Anniversary Collection



For the past few months, American fighting diehards have looked to Japan with envy as gamers have been enjoying Hyper Street Fighter II, an amalgamation of the classic fighting game's five incarnations that features some of the best 2D fighting ever devised and allows for unique bouts between different versions of the same character. But now the Japanese get to be jealous, as Street Fighter Anniversary Collection includes both Hyper Street Fighter II and Street Fighter III: Third Strike in all its challenging, silky-smooth glory. This very well may be the ultimate fighting game collection. -CH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Summer

Mega Man Anniversary Collection



While there was never any doubt about the quality of the 10 games contained in Mega Man Anniversary Collection, the one thing that was in question was if the emulation was up to snuff. Now that I've played the game, I've discovered the answer to be a resounding "yes." Even Mega Man 7, drawn from the SNES, and the Mega Man arcade games are running flawlessly on PS2 (we haven't seen the GC version yet). Also worth noting is that nearly all the added features from the Japanese PSOne Rockman Complete Works games, including easy mode, hints and maps have made it in for Mega Man 1 through 6. -CH

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Atomic Planet/Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Summer



Call of Duty: Finest Hour



Call of Duty received a bevy of awards and enormous critical acclaim when it was released last year on PC, and now this undeniably powerful first-person portrayal of World War II is coming to Xbox. Battles being depicted will include: D-Day, the Russian Charge at Stalingrad and the Battle for Berlin. While this is indeed yet another FPS driven by the terror of war, this time you'll be able to fight through the eyes of American, British and Russian soldiers. Squad-based tactics are a big part of the gameplay, with teamwork and attention to the leader's commands crucial to success. -BF

System: Xbox
Developer: Infinity Ward
Publisher: Activision
Available: Fall

The Bard's Tale



In this action-role-playing game set in a fantastical medieval land patterned after the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland, you play as the Bard, a rather unpleasant adventurer with a knack for music. The only thing the Bard really cares about in life is the pursuit of money...and cleavage. When he converses with the townsfolk, his responses are based on what is called the Snarky/Nice system. Snowblind's Everquest: Champions of Norrath provides the foundation for the Bard's world. -BF

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: inXile Entertainment
Publisher: inXile Entertainment, VU Games
Available: 2004

Cold Winter



Cold Winter sets up its hero in a Chinese prison camp, where he's left to die after being captured on a spy mission. After an unexpected rescue mission by a friend, Andrew Sterling is off to: a) master 30 weapons and types of spy gear; b) watch the enemy go down in a rag-doll physics manner; c) interact with almost everything, using objects for cover and tossing them as weapons; d) give orders and work with AI within the level; and e) collect items to combine into cooler, more devastating items. -BF

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Swordfish Games
Publisher: VU Games
Available: Q1 2005

Dead to Rights 2: Hell to Pay



Dead to Rights may not have been the most exciting, keenly executed action game when it came out in 2002, but it did have enough going for it to set up the inevitable sequel. Returning to lay the smack down is hardened cop Jack Slate, who again takes to the gritty streets of Grant City with his killer canine, Shadow. The game definitely looks better, sticking with a similar theme and tone, pitting its lead character against all kinds of criminal scum. Weapons combat is both in-tight and long-range with the usual assortment of firearms, and a 360-degree hand-to-hand fighting system also comes into play. -BF

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: Fall

Baten Kaitos



We're not exactly sure what "Baten Kaitos" means, but if it translates into "unique," it would certainly be appropriate. Aside from being a rarity as a GameCube-exclusive RPG, Baten Kaitos also features an unconventional card-based battle system in which more than 1000 types of Magnus cards can be combined or used to capture the essence of items. The setting is also a bit atypical: the ocean is now a thing of legend, and lands exist as islands in the sky. Considering that this impressive-looking game comes from the studio behind Xenosaga, we have high expectations for Baten Kaitos. -CH

System: GameCube
Developer: Monolith Soft
Publisher: Namco
Available: TBA

Men of Valor



Set in the hostile grounds of Vietnam and based on historical events, Men of Valor puts you in the role of an American Marine who works with fellow soldiers in the war against communism. The game is being made by 2015, who were responsible for Medal of Honor: Allied Assault, and once again dense scripted events are being woven around the straight first-person action. Through the varied missions, you'll be doing much more than running and gunning, interacting with authentic machinery like a Huey helicopter and making patrols on, say, a riverboat. -BF

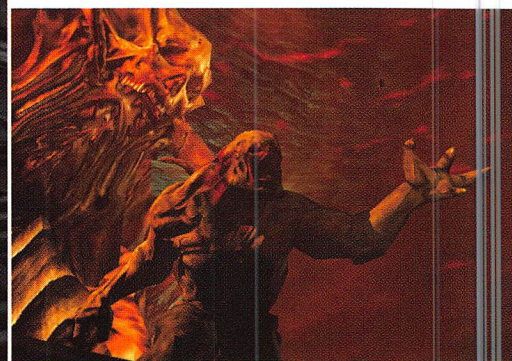
System: Xbox, PC
Developer: 2015
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October

Doom 3

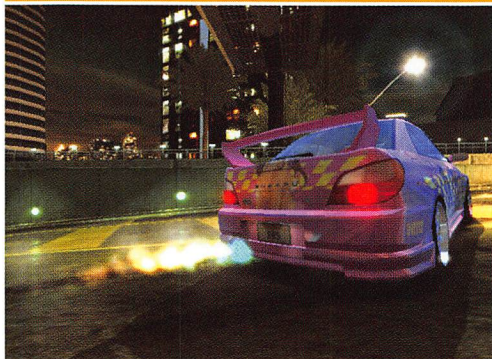


Finally, a chance to see the Xbox version in action; it looks just like the PC. Activision showed a beyond-impressive 10-minute pass through the claustrophobic, moody halls of Doom 3, populated by evil-looking creatures you might expect in a survival horror game. The lighting was spectacular, dancing ominously off the metallic walls and illuminating the scene with a powerful touch of atmosphere. An interesting addition was new death animations, in which the enemies burn and disintegrate. Too bad there was still precious little we could really come away with to form an idea of what the final game will offer. -Nelson Lui

System: Xbox
Developer: Vicarious Visions
Publisher: Activision
Available: Fall



Street Racing Syndicate



A little history: Street Racing Syndicate began as a 3DO title, probably the most promising of the bunch before the company sunk. Now Namco's got the game—a typically flashy take on the legal and illegal street racing scene, complete with bikini-clad babes and enough winnable car parts to supply a factory. The racing takes place in Miami, LA and Philadelphia, where the night streets offer an added level of danger. Make a wrong move and your car is toast, requiring your hard-earned cash for repairs and upgrades. As expected, online competition will be available, offering all the typical features. -BF

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Eutechnyx
Publisher: Namco
Available: Fall

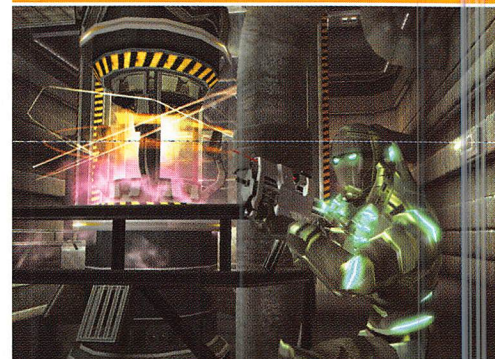
Xenosaga II: Jenseits von Gut und Bose



Picking up where Episode I left off, Monolith's ambitious sci-fi epic will continue the story of Shion, KOS-MOS and their comrades in a tale that promises to delve deeper into the mysteries and theology of the Xenosaga universe. The characters have been redesigned with a more realistic appearance (Shion's opting for a much sexier look), and Namco promises that the game will feature an improved battle system and explore burning questions like the history between Jr. and the murderous Albedo. New characters, like Shion's brother, Jin, and new outdoor environments with weather effects will also be included. -CH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Monolith Soft
Publisher: Namco
Available: Q1 2005

Area 51



Theme is so important in an FPS, and the atmospheric Area 51 is thankfully not another war simulation. The name says it all: as Lt. Nick Cross, you're heading to the infamous Nevada research facility to kill some alien scum. You're saving the earth too, which will require massive assaults with the alien's own personalized weapons. Given that the character designs were handled by Stan Winston Studios, the enemies should at the very least look damn cool scuttling through the shadows. Also worth noting is the involvement of music producer Chris Vrenna, who has worked with the likes of U2 and P.O.D. -BF

System: Xbox
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: Fall



Advance Wars: Under Fire



The strategic military fun of Advance Wars is making the jump to the GameCube, but there have been significant changes from the GBA version—first and foremost that Under Fire is making the jump from turn-based to real-time strategy. Not surprisingly, the visuals have been given a 3D update as well. As before, players will get to command various types of troops—infantry, heavy artillery, armored units and more—who receive promotions and learn new abilities as they gain experience. Vehicles, including tanks and flying gunships, are also at your command. -CH

System: GameCube
Developer: Kuju
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: TBA

Star Fox



Returning to his shooting-oriented origins, Fox McCloud is getting set to hit the GameCube in a brand-new game. For the past year, Nintendo has been content to tantalize gamers with glimpses of multiplayer versus matches, but now they're finally unveiling the single-player mode, in which players control Fox on foot, in the heavily armored Landmaster tank and, naturally, in the cockpit of the famed Arwing fighter. Joining in on the adventure will be Krystal (from Star Fox Adventures), who's looking as foxy as ever. Bring back the toad speaking unintelligible gibberish and we'll be happy. -CH

System: GameCube
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: Q4

Echo Night: Beyond



Alone in the eerie quiet following a shuttle crash on the moon, the main character in Echo Night: Beyond, sequel to the 1999 original, has been separated from his fiancé. Where she has gone remains a mystery; the more immediate concern is the ghosts and spirits prowling about. There's nothing you can do to fight them—this combat-free game is an exploration-based adventure in the truest sense—but you can shut off the mysterious gas that seems to be the source of their wrath, perhaps gaining their favor, resulting in clues to help unravel this enigmatic tale of loss. -CH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: From Software
Publisher: Agetec
Available: Summer

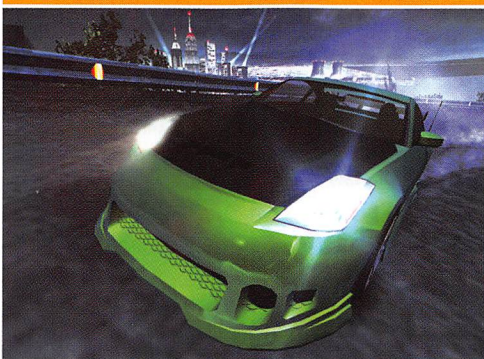
Kuon



Set in the Heiankyo period of Japan and based upon an ancient type of Japanese horror story, Kuon puts you in the role of either Uzuki, a 15-year-old girl who is searching for her father and sister, or Sakuya, a female investigator of the occult. Either way, you'll be thrust into a freakish mansion where you'll master 30 types of magic scrolls that grant various powers, ranging from shooting fire to summoning spiders to raising the dead. Violent terror and Japanese elegance both have prominence in this game, which plays like a cross between a survival horror game and an action title. -CH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: From Software
Publisher: Agetec
Available: September

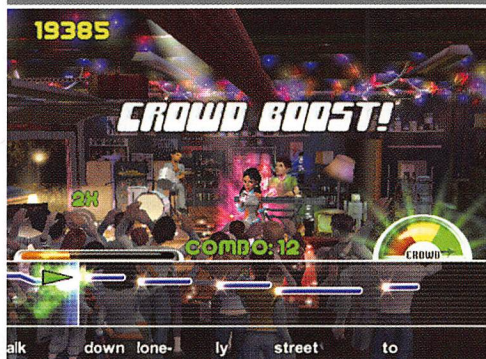
Need For Speed Underground 2



Need for Speed Underground was a killer street racer, making this obvious sequel a hot prospect. What's gonna be even better? More cars, for starters, and a warehouse full of parts to earn for an even cooler ride; EA claims 70 billion possible combinations for your cosmetic obsessions. Five neighborhoods from the same city will hold the races, which are set out across open-ended stretches of track. Like before, you'll meet competitors along the way, forming rivalries and making friends from respectable wins, hopefully culling information for the next hot spot to race and upgrade your car. -BF

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA
Available: Fall

Karaoke Revolution 2



With its broad list of excellent songs, the first Karaoke Revolution was a blast to play...if you didn't mind making a complete fool out of yourself. Now the second volume is already on its way, with 35 new songs, new venues, new characters and a new Medley Mode that links clips together from up to five songs. However, the Top 40-oriented song list might not be so appealing this time. Genie in a Bottle? Baby One More Time? White Flag? Lady Marmalade!? The blackmail potential could be huge! -CH

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Konami
Available: July

Red Dead

Revolver

Rockstar gets down and dirty, conquering yet another era

After it bounced around the rumor mill for the last couple of years, finally ricocheting from Capcom over to Rockstar, I wasn't sure what to expect from Red Dead Revolver. I only knew that I wanted it... badly. Even if it was just a stylized action shooter, who can deny that the dusty look and hard-as-nails veneer didn't make their trigger finger twitch?

Not only is the game much deeper than I imagined, it's also a testament to how games of this ilk (namely tactical shooters) benefit from the third-person perspective. Dead Man's Hand was good, but comparatively speaking merely an appetizer for this stellar Wild West entry. What could have been just another shooter for the FPS pile has been shaped into a deeply immersive Old West adventure, containing a bevy of play mechanics compared to its competition, along with some truly inspired design and cinematography. If Quentin Tarantino or Robert Rodriguez were producing video games, they would likely look something like this. Each story arc unfolds by handing us the reigns to four supporting characters along the way, intertwined with the main quest as Red, a bounty hunter with a serious bone to pick, dishes out revenge, outlaw style.

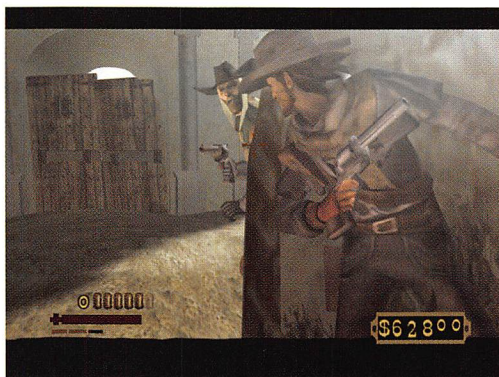
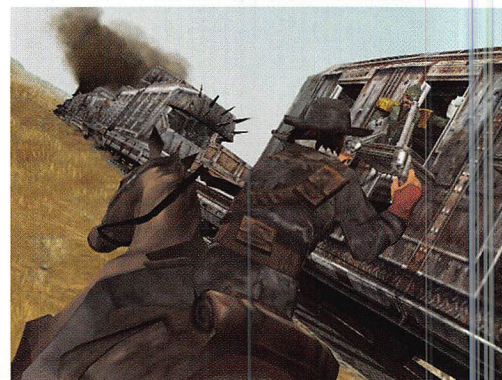
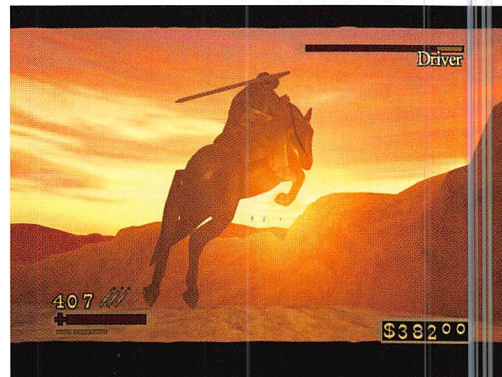
Setting out among the game's dusty, sun-drenched set pieces (old whiskey towns, mining shafts, creek beds, rocky mountains, the open range...it's all here), the run 'n gun and duck-and-cover is some of the best around, rivaling the likes of the original Winback on N64, but only a portion of the game's overall draw. Steps have been painstakingly taken to deliver an authentic Old West experience: shootouts straight out of *The Quick and the Dead*, an unforgettable saloon fight (save the hookers!), chasing down a train on horseback (jumping on and off as you uncouple cars and gun down outlaws), bull riding (with a shotgun-toting cowgirl no less)... Seldom have I been so invested in an overall premise; and what better than a down-and-dirty Western with a mood-inducing soundtrack to boot, bursting at the seams with cowboy clichés? Once you hit Brimstone (the



game's central hub), Red Dead blossoms into nothing less than a Western action-RPG, overflowing with style and substance—levels that are simply too much damn fun, complemented by cinematics that'll keep you grinnin' for the long haul. There's also more to buy and unlock in Red Dead than I have room to elaborate on, especially if you like multiplayer. I spent my bounties on constructive things like rifles, pistols, knives, fire bottles and TNT, but you can purchase journal pages until the cows come home to unlock characters for multiplayer. Red Dead also loves you long time in single player as the normal story mode carries over to hard mode, transferring all of your normal-mode cash and weapons in the process.

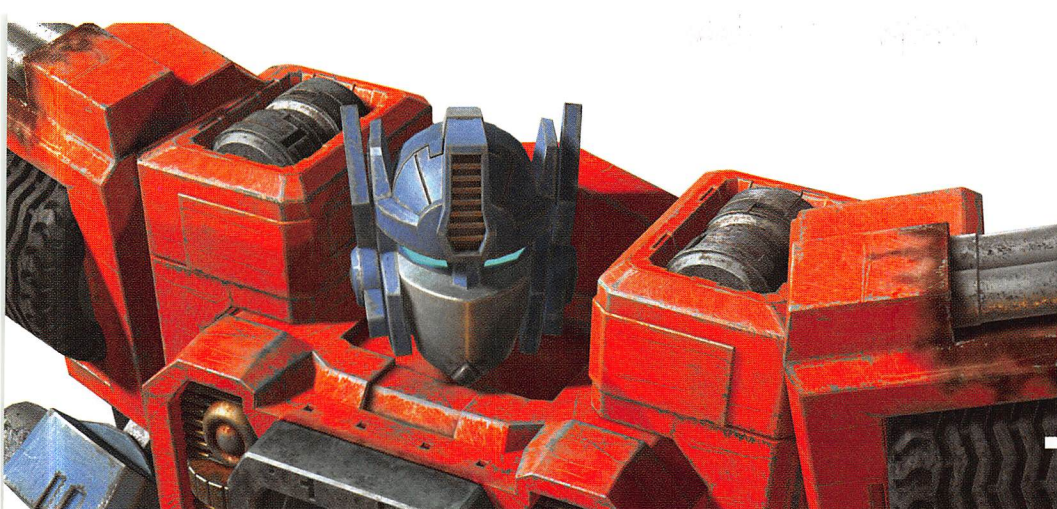
Up until now, Sunset Riders on Genesis led my Old West game posse (might wanna have a look at Lucky Luke for the PS too), but Red Dead Revolver has raised the bar considerably. With any luck we'll see many sequels. Do yourself a favor and grab the Xbox version by the way; it loads way faster and looks a measure better. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Rockstar San Diego
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: May



"Seldom have I been so invested in an overall premise; and what better than a down-and-dirty Western...?"

Backstabbers, inbreeds, derelicts...Red's an equal-opportunity gun for hire.



Transformers

A Prime example of a good licensed game

More than just a game based on a popular license, Transformers, drawing on the Transformers Armada continuity, is an extremely solid action affair that should appeal not only to Transfans who've always wanted to control Optimus Prime and company on current consoles, but also gamers who like their action-shooters slightly on the tactical side.

From a technical standpoint, Transformers is nothing short of thoroughly impressive. The first stage, the Amazon jungle, is packed with foliage, as you wade through seas of individual grass blades and navigate dense groves of trees. Later stages, which include island bases and Antarctic glaciers, are no less impressive. Even when the levels swarm with Decepticon forces boasting complex AI routines, there's never a drop in framerate, and the game never has to load mid-level; plus the draw distance is amazing—you can essentially see the entire level if you find the right vantage point—with no noticeable popup. The shiny, metallic character models look great as well.

Another excellent feature is the Mini-Con power-up system. As in the Armada cartoon, Mini-Cons are small robots that are found throughout the environments and attach to the main characters, bestowing new abilities to the user. Aside from being a cool method of character growth, this system adds a nice strategic touch to the proceedings. Do you equip Knockdown, with his EMP

disruption abilities, or go for Look-Out, the sniper rifle (my personal favorite)? Should you take Safeguard for extra armor or will you need Highjump's jump boost in the current area? Additional considerations emerge since specific Mini-Con combinations grant extra health and weapon energy.

But for all the game's merits, there really aren't all that many moments of greatness that put it into that upper echelon of gaming. Some scenes, like the spaceship stage (which starts as an all-out warzone and then transforms into a platforming level after the ship crashes upright) and the epic boss battle against Tidal Wave, are brilliant; most of the rest, however, are merely good. Some of this must be attributed to relentless AI, which requires the game to be played at a subdued, thoughtful pace. More control options and better use of vehicle mode would have been nice too.

While better level design and improved pacing could have made Transformers even better, what's here is nothing if not enjoyable, and the unlockable bonus features are especially nice. This certainly makes up for Takara's hideous Japan-only Transformers PS2 game..

Chris Hoffman B

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Melbourne House
Publisher: Atari
Available: May



"From a technical standpoint, Transformers is nothing short of thoroughly impressive."

A classic confrontation:
 Optimus Prime vs. Megatron...
 over the mouth of a volcano!



Hitman

Contracts

The killer silent type

There's a perverse underground party of sex and drugs going down in a massive meat packing plant. In one of the more private areas, a lunatic is chopping up a teenage girl to the soothing sounds of "Put Your Head on My Shoulder." Christmas tree air fresheners hang from the ceiling to stifle the stench. An obese man lounges on his plush bed in a neighboring room, sucking on an opium pipe. Both men are about to be murdered by contract killer Agent 47. Doesn't matter how, as long as the job's complete.

In the violent, impressively atmospheric Hitman: Contracts, your options for the hit are many—strike with a meat hook, taint a meal, suffocate with a pillowcase, splatter a target's brains with a silenced pistol. Moving into place to finish the job comes down to an enormous array of paths and possible decisions. How you choose to complete the task comes down to how clever you are in working around the open-ended obstacles before you—and how patient you are as a methodical killer. The game really must be played with stealthy efficiency; inciting mass shootouts is awkwardly common in the trial-and-error gameplay, teaching you to stick to meticulous strategizing to discover the game's growing enjoyment.

While the task in each mission comes down to the elimination of a few central targets, the diverse areas in Hitman: Contracts are full of enemy activity, which will offer you more than enough headaches as the overly sensitive guards track your every movement. An invaluable yet artificially imposed map feature details in real time where everyone is moving around, helping you navigate unseen. Donning a fallen foe's clothes is often a smart choice, greatly diminishing the threat of being detected on your way to the hit.

Agent 47 is tasked with some pretty brutal objectives. It's a shame he's such a one-dimensional character, wasting an exceptional opportunity for a compelling psychological backdrop to join the pervasively strong imagery. Cutscenes are nothing much more than stylish breaks, and the poor character animation keeps you at just enough of a distance to feel like you're part of an artificial game rather than an affecting reality of despair. Still, working around the game's deficiencies reveals a unique and occasionally rewarding experience. **Brady Fiechter B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

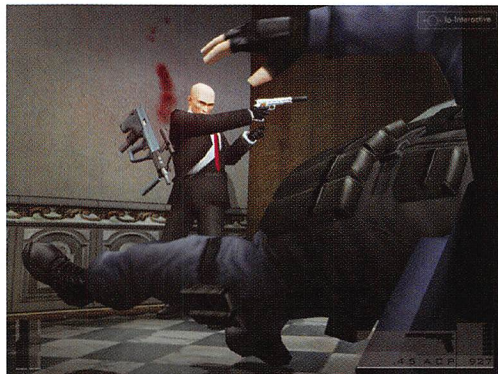
Developer: IO Interactive

Publisher: Eidos

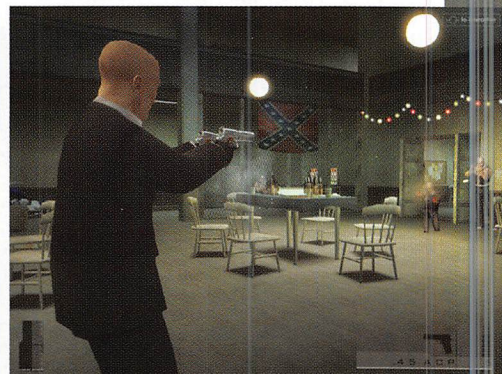
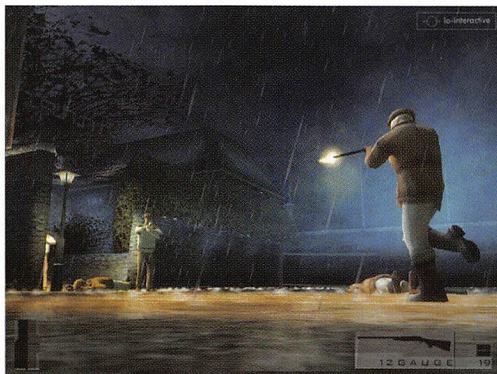
Available: April



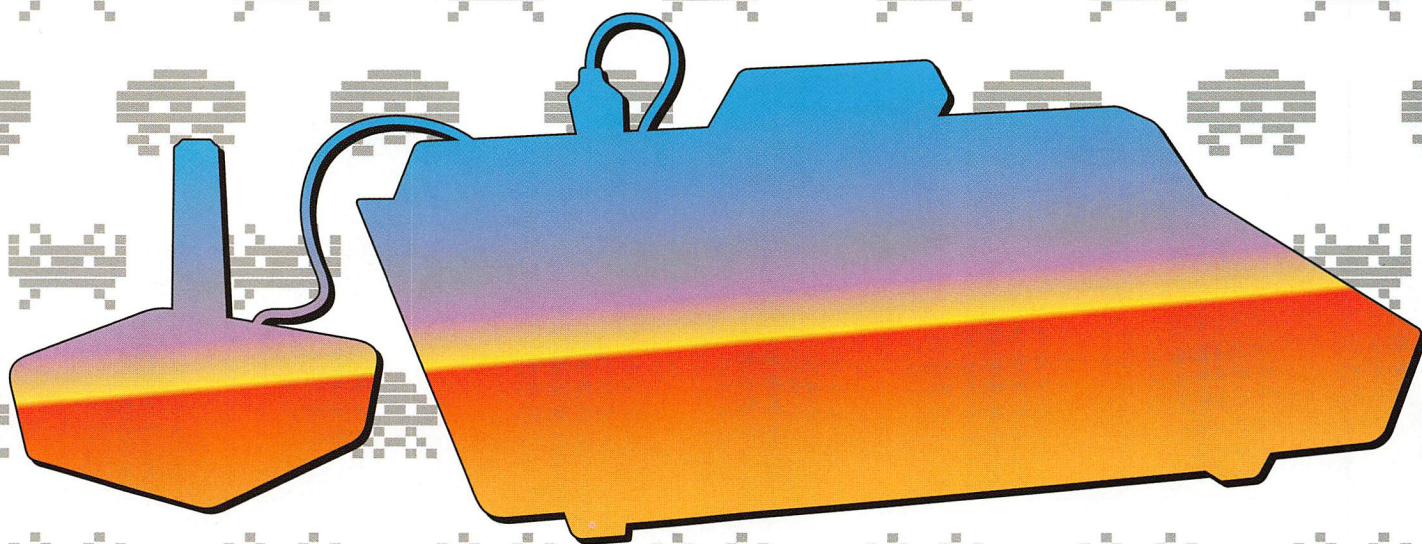
"...strike with a meat hook, taint a meal, suffocate with a pillowcase, splatter a target's brains with a silenced pistol."



It's not the most technically sound game, but the look is compelling.



Retro Games



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Bujingai

All show, some go

Few action games can actually be called elegant—among them Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Devil May Cry, Onimusha 2 & 3, anything Panzer Dragoon, GunValkyrie, Ninja Gaiden and, in the almost column, Shinobi and Nightshade. Both of Sega's recent ninjas were certainly elegant but fell short for lack of detail elsewhere. Bujingai, co-developed by two legendary Japanese studios, Red and Taito, lies somewhere in between. Something of a deeper, more polished Shinobi, what it lacks in architecture and evolving gameplay, it makes up for in mood, ambience and polish.

For starters, the central character, a blade-master named Lau, has more moves than a Chinese acrobat and, although quite feminine, is a wicked sword fighter. His model is the very picture of ornate Japanese design, and his movement borders on exquisite, with each swipe of his dual blades accompanied by a spray of transparent colored light. Able to wall-run in all directions, glide and air combo to traverse massive gorges, he's truly a joy to control and, with his blades drawn, he has one of the best lock-ons I've ever had the pleasure of playing, along with the ability to block and deflect even the most ferocious attack, be it natural disaster or at the hands of the game's many gigantic beasts.

It's the levels themselves that fail to impress. While the towering vertical post-apocalyptic neo-Tokyo platforming levels (Psychic Force fans rejoice; we get to play here!) certainly deliver the thrills, they are few and short-lived in contrast to the redundant, mostly action-oriented levels. Laying waste to the marionette-like demons (right out of Devil May Cry 2) is certainly entertaining, but when it's only interrupted by rudimentary level objectives it can get a bit tired. The bosses certainly spice things up (man, are they beautiful), but the game's best bits—a series



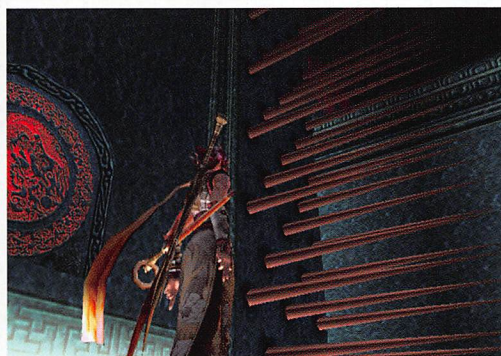


“...what it lacks in architecture and evolving gameplay, it makes up for in mood, ambience and polish.”

of floating castle grounds at the game's end—make you wish that the designers would have built the entire game between these and the cityscapes. As it is, Lau seems almost overdeveloped for the game at hand. Collecting orbs from the dearly departed allows you to increase your magic, defense and health, but you'll barely need the help, so these elements serve as overkill more than valuable tools. There's just not enough diversity here to really take advantage of all of the style. I was challenged exactly once in Bujingai at the last boss (in all of his glory), where I found my deflecting techniques frustratingly inept. As for the music, a kind of Gagaku/pop fusion, it is for the most part as elegant as the art itself.

If you're up for some gorgeous action gaming interrupted by bouts of platforming and appreciate the art of Japanese game design and ambience, Bujingai is certainly worth investigating, and in the odd case you're a fan of *Psychic Force* or *X*, just leave now and go find this game. However, if you like your adventuring more complex, you'd best move on down the line. And finally, to whomever came up with the idea of taking the first few minutes of gameplay and turning them into the game's opening cinema, bravo. **Dave Halverson 8-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Red/Taito
Publisher: BAM!
Available: May



Not your everyday level guardian. The models in Bujingai are exceptional.



Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent **A**
Good **B**
Fair **C**
Poor **D**
Worthless **F**



Game of the Month

» Red Dead Revolver p 054

"...a deeply immersive Old West adventure, containing a bevy of play mechanics.."

Also notice...



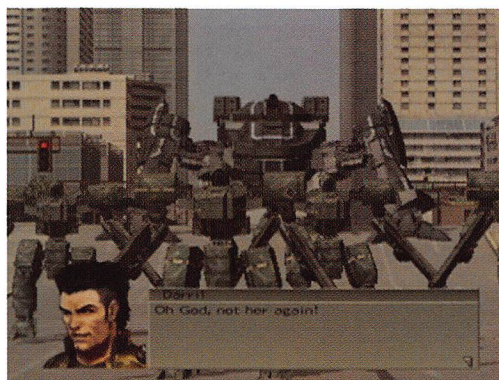
Transformers p 055

Behind the toy-license veneer is an engaging action-shooter with a bit of platforming and a nice power-up system. Transform and roll out!



Shining Force p 072

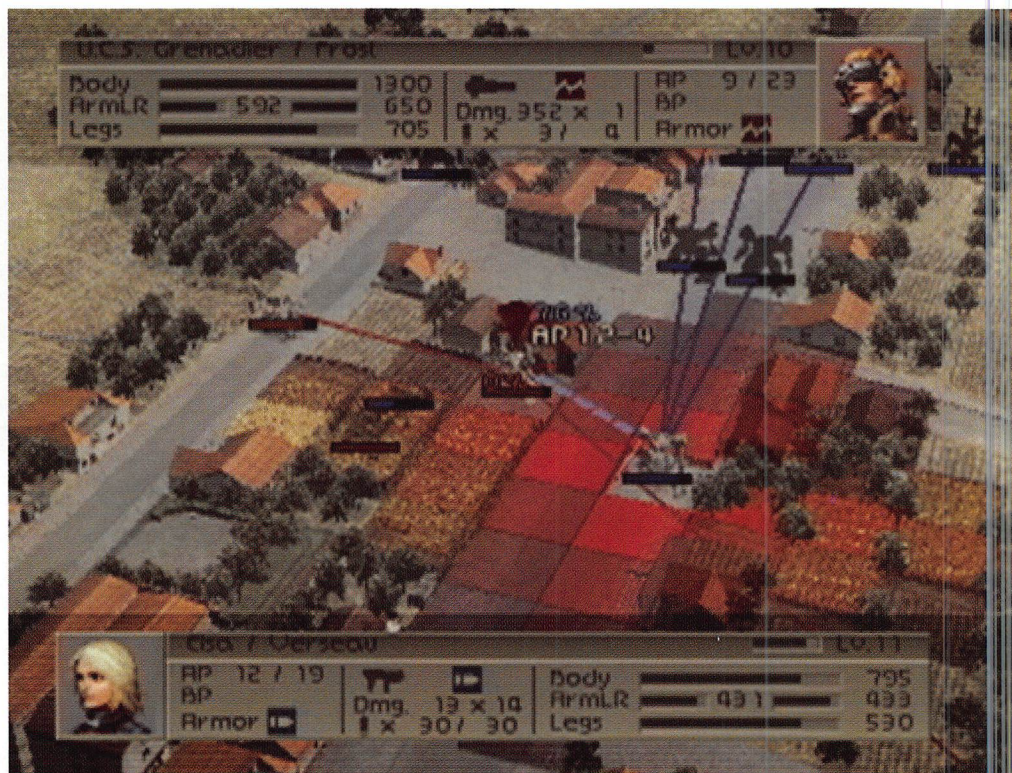
Shining Force is back, more than a decade after the original hit the Genesis. Discover why it's a defining moment for strategy-RPGs.



Front Mission 4

The giant, lumbering Wanzer mechs are back in fastidious action for the first time on PS2 in Front Mission 4, a satisfying and often engaging sequel especially crafted for that seasoned fan who is able to put up with the leaden nature of turn-based strategy. While not engaged in heavy (and clunky) dialogue or working on upgrading and refining your mechs and their pilots, the meat of the game takes shape on the grid-based battlefields. You continually take your turn for minutes at a time, moving your units around good-looking militaristic terrain, pinpointing and wearing down multiple weak spots on the enemy with your wide array of explosive weapons, all the while dealing with the drain on AP. Not for newbies; everyone else, expect to be hooked. **Brady Flechter B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: May



The game may not blow your mind with its visual prowess, but the mech designs are certainly cool.



Future Tactics

Ever heard of Zed Two? Neither had I... Heck, I thought Crave was long gone too. Funny how they're about to release their best game, having slid all the way back down the hill. Future Tactics is an innovative, refreshing take on strategy-RPGs that offers up some nice freedom and player control within what is traditionally a very confining space, as you position yourself for the tactical advantage. The targeting system, offensive and defensive balance and especially the design are all surprisingly adept, as is the integrated story, about nomadic Earthlings on the run from alien hordes. Music is way cool too. The game's got a wicked learning curve, but otherwise, this is 20 bucks well spent. **Dave Halverson C+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Zed Two
Publisher: Crave
Available: May



Corvette

Before a game is created, I think one thing needs to be clear: who it's for. And if that's reserved for people that like Corvettes so much they'll buy a second-tier racing game to drive one, well, that's a problem. Just like in real life, the Corvettes on display possess wicked oversteer and, adding insult to injury, grace some of the most lackluster course designs I've ever traversed while good-'ol-boy rock and swanky sax music crackles in the background. Check please! Mr. Goodwrench won't let these sleds take damage either, so go ahead and plunge into those guard rails. It's all good; you can close a half-mile gap in half a lap—great AI too. All the requisite race and chase modes are here, but with competition like the NFSU and Burnout out there, why bother? **Dave Halverson C-**

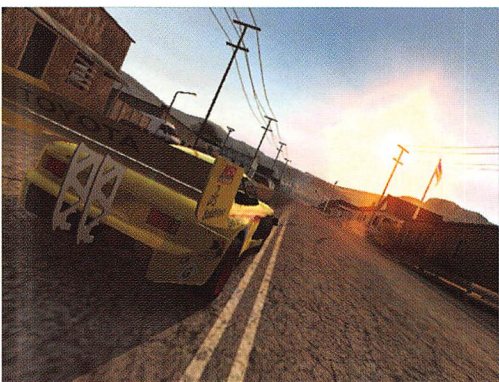
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Steel Monkeys
Publisher: Global Star Software
Available: March



La Pucelle: Tactics

If you find yourself staring at the walls now that Disgaea is over or you just like a good Japanese tactical RPG, the predecessor, La Pucelle: Tactics (weighing in at 120 hours long), should tide you over for a good while. Because it's the predecessor, you don't get those spectacular manga-style overlays (they hadn't introduced them yet); however, you do get more diverse regional adventuring (set in medieval Europe), a deeper base of operations in the nicely layered town and, once again, an extraordinarily deep battle system, including the ability to "turn" monsters and string together massive combos by mastering the streams. The story centers on wall-to-wall teenage girls of the squeaky kind, but La Pucelle certainly delivers as advertised. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Nippon Ichi Software
Publisher: Mastiff
Available: May



Rallisport Challenge 2

You've likely seen the Volvo S40 commercial and wondered if the game really looks *that* good. Well, it does. In fact, at this point in the racing game, as amazing as all of these games are starting to look, it really boils down to stickiness, physics and control, course design, Live components (tournaments, team races, downloadable ghosts...this one has it all), replays and music—of which RC2 delivers on every count, while offering up rally, rallycross, ice racing, crossover and hill climb events. It's astonishingly detailed, wicked fun and the music streams non-stop to drive it all home. The only flaw I could find was that the cars don't leave any real-time impression on the courses (hey, but the onlookers are actually 3D!), otherwise RC2 fires on all cylinders. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: Xbox
Developer: DICE/MGS
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: May



Professional drivers on closed courses: do attempt these maneuvers at home.



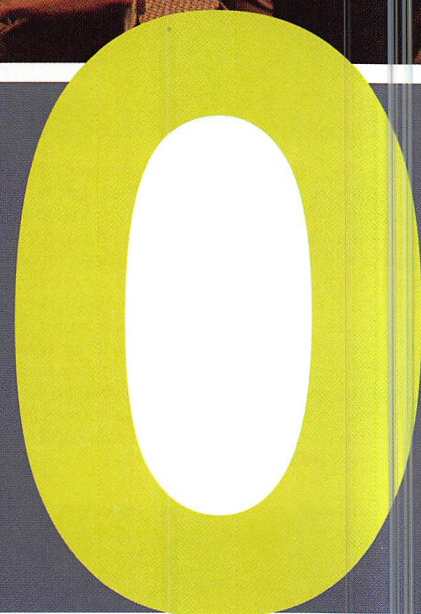


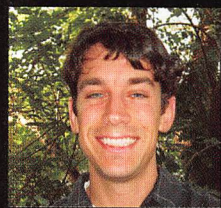
The Insomniac family in their Burbank HQ. If you played Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando, you may have already visited.

Insomniac turns

From humble beginnings...

Insomniac has been making top-quality Sony games now for a decade, helping evolve first-person shooters right out of the gate with Disruptor, and since given us some of gaming's most endearing critters in Spyro the Dragon (and company) and, of course, Ratchet & Clank. Insomniac faces each new project with the same verve they put into their first, whether it's a sequel or something new, and always shine an innovative light on whatever they create. This is a truly unique, tight, family-oriented team of professionals dedicated above all to entertaining the Sony faithful. To help celebrate 10 years of great games, here's a rare glimpse at what makes them tick.





Interview

Ted Price, president and founder, Insomniac Games

play: You've now been toiling in this industry for over ten years. How's the view from the top?

Ted Price: Well, that implication is certainly flattering. I think we're always looking for the monster hit that will truly put us on top—we're not quite there yet. However, we're all very proud of what we've been able to accomplish with *Disruptor*, the *Spyro* series on PlayStation and now the *Ratchet & Clank* franchise.

I think surviving, and even better, thriving, in this industry can be a real battle. What we're realizing now is how fortunate we are to have maintained our independence during the past 10 years and to have had enough success to be able to make the games we really want to make. A lot of developers these days no longer have that luxury because of financial constraints or because they're part of a larger company.

The best part of being where we are now though is that making games is still a lot of fun. I'd even say that because we have more security now than we did 10 years ago, making games is a lot MORE fun. Certainly it's less stressful.

Ten years by gaming standards doesn't seem so long given how long it takes to build a great game. Still, the leap in 3D from *Disruptor* to *Ratchet & Clank* is pretty dramatic. What has changed the most in your eyes in terms of developing a game from the ground up over the last decade?

I think that our industry has "grown up." Ten years ago, Insomniac was a great example of a garage developer. We had no idea how to make a game, much less run a business. And we certainly weren't the only ones. But back then there was less at stake.

Today, to make a game that can claw its way onto retail shelves, you've got to have an efficient production process, a professional production team, solid management and fantastic tools and technology. And that's *in addition* to great ideas for the game itself.

Because game consoles are more sophisticated, budgets are much larger and shelf space is so scarce, the risks are higher than ever in development *and* in publishing. Ten years ago as a developer, you could screw up a couple of times and still be OK. Today, you miss a couple of ship dates and it's all over.

Do you think that video games are unduly scrutinized these days to appease the retail gods before any development can begin? Is creativity being stifled in the name of mainstream viability? Original ideas, totally original concepts, don't seem so welcome right now.

It's pretty clear that a lot of publishers are chasing the mass market in a huge way. This means that games featuring what Al Hastings here calls "the fantasy of the familiar" rule the roost. So as a result we get tons of games based on licenses, games based on real-life scenarios and fewer and fewer games that try to be truly different.

Taking a chance on an original concept, especially one that may involve characters or settings that are more "fantastic," is very risky because the market is moving away from these games. Does this mean that creativity is being stifled? I don't think so—there are plenty of games with more "mainstream" settings and characters that exhibit originality in their game designs. With the exception of a few big titles based on licenses, gamers won't put up with recycled ideas

for long.

I will say that one company that *does* take chances on fresh, original concepts is Sony Computer Entertainment America. If you look at what they've published during this generation, you won't see a lot of "me-too" titles. But I'm obviously pretty biased.

What advice would you give to aspiring game designers, writers, etc. trying to start in the business today? What does it take to get in front of the right people?

The best advice I can give is to find a company that makes products you respect and do whatever it takes to get hired there. If you have to start as a tester, so be it. But once you're in, you can learn what it really takes to make a game. The lessons you learn going through the production process can't be taught in school.

Furthermore, simple things like having a résumé devoid of mistakes, having solid design/writing samples available (even if you haven't been asked) and creating a well thought-out and personalized introductory letter can make the difference between being called in for an interview and being passed over.

How did it used to be back when you began? Have things really changed THAT much?

When we started, 16-bit machines like SNES and Genesis were just giving way to the 32-bit [and 64-bit] machines (3DO, N64 and PlayStation). Side-scrolling platformers ruled and true 3D games were rare.

Now we're right around the corner from next-generation consoles, which in some cases promise environments and characters that should be damn close to photorealistic. So in terms of what you see on screens, the change has been phenomenal for such a short period of time. (As a contrast, what you see in movie theaters is almost exactly the same as what we were seeing 35 years ago.)

Team sizes have gone from 5-10 in 1994 to more than 100 in some cases today. The number of games released every year, the number of retail outlets offering games, the amount of money spent on marketing campaigns—everything has been growing almost exponentially.

What has remained surprisingly consistent though is the retail price of games. In fact, games are actually *cheaper* than they used to be. Remember when cartridge-based games went for more than \$70?

When you look at movie making, CG has transformed a lot of the way movies are made, but the process is still pretty much the same as it's been for years. Would you say technology is what drives the most dramatic change in games?

Absolutely. You could look at it a couple of ways.

Every five or six years we get some really cool new toys that allow us to do things we couldn't have possibly done on the previous generation of consoles.

Every five or six years we have to completely re-engineer our technology from the ground up, which is incredibly expensive and wasteful.

Either way, gamers win.

What is your single shining moment of the last decade?

Finding out that *Ratchet & Clank* (the original) was going to be bundled with the PS2 in Japan. No American developer

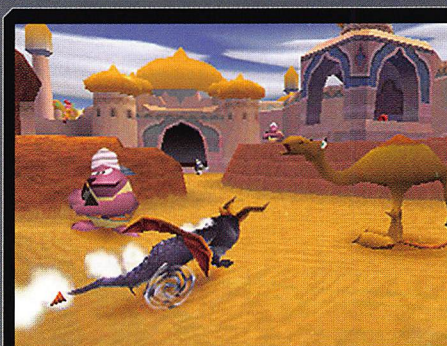
A decade's worth of great games...



Disruptor 1996



Spyro the Dragon 1998



Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage 1999

"I think we're always looking for the monster hit that will truly put us on top—we're not quite there yet."

—Ted Price President, Insomniac Games

"I mean, come on—no matter what, it's going to be a hell of lot more fun than writing accounting software."

—Ted Price *President, Insomniac Games*

had been able to break into that market on the PS2 and thanks to Sony Japan, we did it.

And your lowest low?

Missing our first real deadline: first playable for *Disruptor* in 1994. I think this was the last critical milestone we ever missed.

What's it like in the midst of putting together an epic-scope game? Is it as fun as everyone imagines or more of a grind?

It's a lot of both. It's awesome to see new characters, levels and gameplay come up on screens every day. At the same time, it's not so awesome to be waiting on a burn at 4AM because someone forgot to check in his code.

Fortunately, we have a lot of talented people here to share the burdens of development so even in the depths of deadlines, the grind is significantly less onerous than it was five years ago. And besides, we're making GAMES! I mean, come on—no matter what, it's going to be a hell of lot more fun than writing accounting software.

How important is the team aspect of game development, and what's your secret here at Insomniac where everyone seems to think with the same brain?

"Collaborative creativity" is one of the core principles here at Insomniac. By that, I mean everyone gets a chance to contribute to the designs—game design, story, characters, weapons, enemy behavior, etc. We have a lot of brainstorming meetings that involve people from different departments, we have internal forums where people can discuss new ideas and, of course, anyone can always just stop by the design department and rattle off suggestions.

As a result, we're able to get a huge amount of variety in the games and, even better, everyone has a strong sense of ownership in the titles we create.

Even though you may see a few "face people" talking about the games in the press (like me), those people often get far too much credit because we're the ones in front of the camera. What's very easy to forget is that these games cannot exist without a talented, cohesive team of pros working their asses off night and day. Without the team, there's nothing.

Do you get the chance to play a lot of games? What do you like? Give us your top five for the last year.

Unfortunately, as Insomniac continues to grow (we have more than 100 people now), I have less and less time to play. But I still get just as excited about new releases as I did when I was 10 years old playing the newest Atari 2600 games. My favorite types of games? First-person shooters, RPGs and the occasional platformer.

The games that have sucked away the majority of my time this year are: *Call of Duty*, *Star Wars Galaxies Online* (can't... stop... playing...), *Rainbow Six 3*, *Desert Combat* (BF1942 mod), *SSX 3*.

Where do you see games going in the next decade? Will they have to be so easy and bogged down with licenses to hit big or will publishers find a better way to retail games and let developers get back to making really challenging games? You play *Ninja Gaiden*? Holy...it beat me while I was beating it! Don't you miss that? You kept it real with *Ratchet GC*. Will you continue to make your games challenging?

I don't think we have to worry about games getting too easy.

There are plenty of games out now that chew me up and spit me out. And I like to think that I'm an OK player. The problem that I have personally is that most games are so long these days that I have no hope of finishing them. Of course, that hasn't prevented us from making *Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando* ridiculously long.

I don't think the key is to make games hard, it's to tune them well so that hardcore players and casual players both have fun. With *Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando* we spent a lot of time tuning and retuning the game until both types of players in our tests were enjoying themselves. And we'll continue with that approach.

But will licenses and rip-offs clog the shelves until there's no room for original ideas? Only if gamers let it happen. The gamers have always been in control.

We hear a lot about how originality is a tough sell these days and that sequels and licenses are the name of the game. Does this limit even a studio as amazing as Insomniac to churning out sequels? Not that we don't want 10 R&Cs, but are you thinking about what's next? We're always thinking about what's next. We just can't tell you what it is.

What marked leaps will the PS3 bring to gaming? Think we'll ever see a leap as dramatic as 8- to 16-bit or 2D to 3D?

If I knew, you know I'd tell you, right?

Here's a good one for you. Do you ever wonder what your game might look like on Xbox?

Not for a second.

You guys looking into any killer apps for EyeToy?

Nope. But I'm looking forward to the first Eye Toy surfing game.

What about the PSP? You must be on board with that. Is it going to blow us all away with mind-blowing 2D or will it be more of a 3D machine? And don't say you can't say... You can say. It's only video games, Ted... Plus, we go back.

Yeah we do. Remember that time at that bar when we were having a few and then you told that biker you could kick his ass and he said "Oh yeah?" and you said "Yeah!" and then he left and came back with 10 of his biker friends and then he threw a chair at you and broke the mirror behind the bar and the police came and everyone was arrested and—wait, what was the question again?

If Sony were to say "Ted, take all the time and resources you need and make your ultimate vision," how long would it take and what would it look like?

The reality is that every game we've made has been our ultimate vision at the time. We come up with the best ideas we can, figure out how long it will take us to create the game and how much it will cost and then go to our publisher (Universal at first, Sony now) and propose a deal. And what's great is that every time, we've been able to go for it.

What we *don't* do is propose game ideas that will take an inordinately long time to implement. We try to keep our production cycles and budgets reasonable. No one wants to work on a game for five years.

Think they'll ever say that?

Sony has basically been saying that since we started. **play**

continued...



Spyro: Year of the Dragon 2000



Ratchet & Clank 2002



Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando 2003



Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal 2004



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- PLAY Magazine
"Catch some really big game like Dinosaur Hunting on Xbox next month"
- 1UP.COM
"8.1/10 rating"
- Official Xbox Magazine



Mild language
Violence



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Painkiller

Review

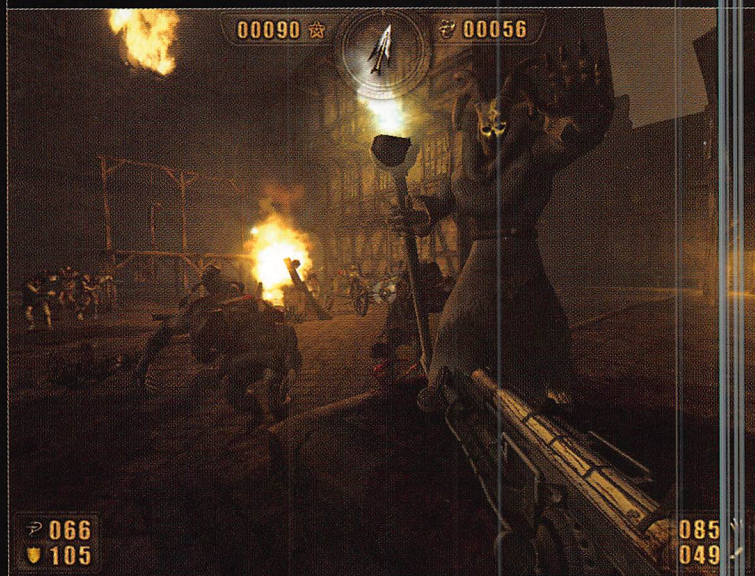
The gibbs are delicious and the stake is nasty

Much has been made of Painkiller's adherence to the "old-school shooter" feel, and indeed, People Can Fly have managed to imbue their first title with the addicting adrenaline rush the classic shooters evoked before the advent of stealth gameplay all but consumed modern FPS games. The unfettered purity of reflexive blasting combined with intimidating swarms of demonic creatures and glorious showers of crimson chunks—these are the compelling ingredients the FPS genre was founded on. That being said, Painkiller is not devoid of contemporary cerebral thrills. Beyond the stunning visuals and massive encroaching waves of Lucifer's army, you'll find some truly memorable boss encounters replete with tricks and patterns to solve, and each level contains many cunning secrets to discover.

The striking image quality of this absolutely gorgeous pastiche of tainted purgatory is a big factor in Painkiller's appeal. The texture variety and resolution are consistently inspired displays, painting a game-wide mural of meticulous opulence that has raised the bar for artwork in the genre. The attraction is heightened by



The undead have rarely looked so good.



fantastic architecture based on a variety of themes, from brooding Gothic cathedrals and crumbling medieval castles saturated in unholy atmosphere to amazingly gritty and dense industrial wastelands. Levels such as the Asylum demonstrate a superb gift for rich ambiance. This doomed madhouse is cast beneath a torrential rainstorm (with great particle effects), and the combination of lighting, color and environment design gracing this sinister dwelling feels just perfect. If People Can Fly ever flexes their graphical prowess in a dark and ominous adventure game, we're destined for some sleepless nights.

Fighting the two-dozen-plus enemy types in Painkiller yields very satisfying results, given the slaughterhouse gusto of certain encounters. The enemy designs and abilities are inventive and the flurry of exaggerated physics that plot their path to destruction is always entertaining. Although the core AI of these detailed abominations certainly pales in comparison to recent efforts like Far Cry, we probably shouldn't be looking for advanced intellect from the drones of hell. Instead, their freaky interaction with the environment and with each other takes priority while your pulverizing weapons go to work. Amputees eerily shamble across walls and ceilings on all fours, the shotgun-wielding Skulls hook nearby Hell Bikers around the neck and use them as meat shields, Maso Commandos divert their flamethrowers to torch skeletal infantry, and many other grim and amusing signature moves play out. The large outdoor levels are ripe for spawning insane herds of enemies, and these demonic stampedes are reminiscent of the best moments of the PC Serious Sam games—in that you can't believe how many pursuers are swarming you, or the grinding intensity of this epic stew of gibbs cascading across the screen as your rockets strike true.

Capping off Painkiller's already impressive package is a well-paced single-player campaign with glorious chapter-ending boss battles that demand specific strategies, not just wild blasting. There are also magic tarot card powers to reveal by meeting certain requirements, and these tasks become increasingly unique and difficult. The multiplayer game is somewhat bare and underused at this point, but PCF are committed to expanding it. Finally, PK's music and sound effects are merely good, while the story cinematics are average, but the quality contrast is profound next to the pristine real-time graphics. The bottom line here, though, is a comfortably simple word: fun. This is a cutting-edge update to classic FPS games, done right, as both a tribute and a step forward. **Mike Griffin B+**

Developer: People Can Fly
Publisher: Dreamcatcher
Available: April

"The striking image quality of this absolutely gorgeous pastiche of tainted purgatory is a big factor in Painkiller's appeal."



Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising Preview

Epic combat and vast theaters of modern war

The popularity of team-based multiplayer shooters using historical war campaigns as backdrops, such as Call of Duty, cannot be questioned. It's clear that both console and PC gamers are hungry for more of this genre. Enter NovaLogic, the veteran developer and publisher responsible for Delta Force: Black Hawk Down. They've recognized that large-scale combat in a modern setting is an untapped resource in this genre, and it has led them to the creation of Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising—a powerful team shooter that may well become the next big online phenomenon.

Joint Operations is set in a shattered Indonesia in the near future, where the military force has devolved into well-armed rebel armies, capturing regions by force while denouncing a government they deem corrupt. The world takes notice of this conflict, and several friendly nations send elite joint operatives into the thick of Southeast Asia to drive out the rebels and restore order. The rebel side is composed of ex-military and trained separatists, allowing them to match the Joint Ops bullet for bullet.

Both factions share a varied roster of character classes that balance and sustain a good squad: the gunner, rifleman, medic, sniper, heavy gunner and engineer offer their own brand of firepower and maintenance tools. Each class uses specific primary and secondary weapons, and unique items such as remote explosives and med packs. The equipment load will determine encumbrance, which affects your soldier's run speed. Each nation also offers a specialty class. The Russian Spetsnaz, for example, are masters of hand-to-hand combat, while Britain's SAS have advanced weapons training and jungle combat experience.

Joint Operations will include over 30 huge multiplayer maps, brought to life using an enhanced Black Hawk engine that draws dense and convincing jungle environments over one kilometer into the horizon. To travel these enormous playfields, there are 29 land, sea and air vehicles. This collection spans a wide spectrum of size and purpose, from fast attack jeeps and powerboats to large, amphibious six-man carriers and heavy lifting Chinook helicopters, and each ride has multiple seats for maximum cooperative effort. Flying a huge transport chopper between two islands, a Humvee

"NovaLogic have recognized that large-scale combat in a modern setting is an untapped resource in this genre..."



fully loaded with personnel in the cargo hold, gunners mounted on either side, your co-pilot scanning the air for targets, while smaller helicopters strafe past at high speed and armored patrol boats engage each other far below—over 80 players driving for the win—this is a wild spectacle of multiplayer vehicle use that must be experienced.

The game is set to feature several deathmatch and team modes, including the exciting "Advance and Secure," where Joint Ops and rebel forces vie for control over key bases, linked to each other across vast maps. There will also be full mod tools, and single-player missions that expand upon the storyline and promote vehicle use. The NovaWorld multiplayer service will handle all matching and stat tracking, and NovaLogic has teamed up with Even Balance to integrate their PunkBuster anti-cheat system into Joint Operations to eliminate foul play. Obviously the potential 100-player action with high-detail options will require a powerful PC, but it will pay off to upgrade for silky smooth play in games like Joint Operations—proof that 2004 is a banner year for PC gaming as technology evolves well beyond what consoles are capable of.

Mike Griffin

Developer: NovaLogic

Publisher: NovaLogic

Available: May 2004



The best part about the vehicles is that you and your war buddies can all be sitting inside.



Lineage II: The Chaotic Circle

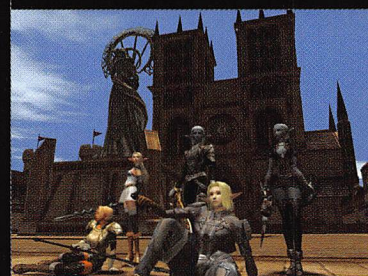
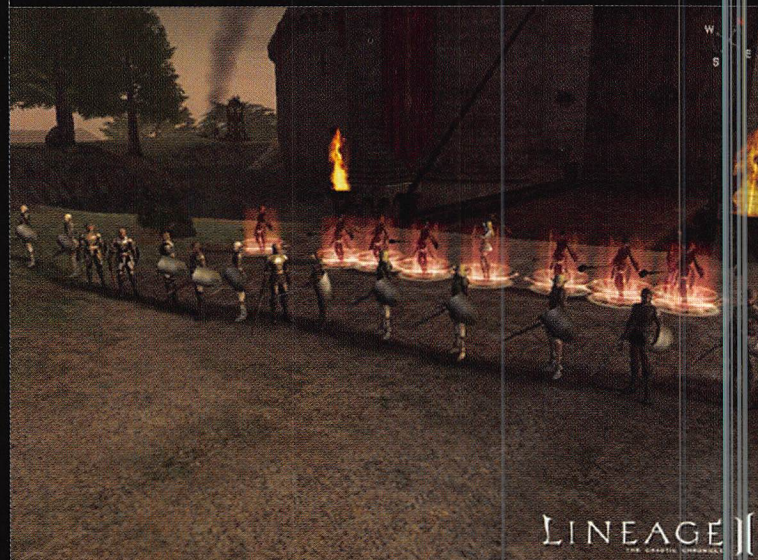
Preview

The harbingers of war prepare their forces

Lineage II will be in stores as you read this, loaded with tons of content across its vast online fantasy setting, but this massively multiplayer RPG won't see its first major Chronicle milestone until early June. One of the most anticipated additions coming in this huge content patch is the full implementation of the Castle Siege system. Destined to be one of L2's defining features, player clans will use their high-level characters to attack, control and defend massive walled hubs of political power rooted in the heart of five major territories.

The ramifications of castle ownership aren't just cosmetic or ego-based. When a well-organized clan of players occupies a castle by defeating the NPCs within, the clan leader becomes Castle Lord. Besides several internal benefits such as clan residence and storage, he will also gain control over the tax rates for all shops in the territory. Setting high rates will probably raise the ire of players, while a fair Lord will gain alliances. In any case, it's not a worry-free stay. Maintaining the castle requires serious funds, and the leader is required to select a specific siege time, basically a period during which the castle itself is vulnerable to attack, within 15 days following occupation. Alliance leaders may register as Defenders with the castle's NPC Chamberlain to lend their clan's support, and the Castle Lord can edit and approve the final list of participants. Of course, the chosen time, visible externally, may spark a competing clan's ambitions, and the leader of these Attackers can register an entire legion to take part using the Siege Participation ability.

The siege will last for two full hours, during which the castle and the surrounding area become the battlefield. Normal NPC actions will halt, and non-registered players inside the castle will be sent to a nearby town. The attacking clan's leader can create a special camp in a designated area outside the castle, and it provides



his force with a respawn point following death and also improves regeneration during the siege. The castle gates and encampment flag can be attacked—and both have ample, but finite, hitpoints, with no way to be repaired. Should the camp fall, Attackers will spawn in the second-nearest town, so this flag requires protection. Deep within the castle is a holy artifact that records the Castle Lord's name. To seize the castle, the attacking clan must clear a path to this chamber and guard their clan leader for several moments while he scribes his name onto the artifact. Only the leader can interact with it, and he cannot be interrupted. Gaining control of the artifact is a "mid victory," and while the siege doesn't end, all roles are reversed: the attacking clan becomes the castle Defenders, acquiring all powers associated with the castle including a restart point within. The defeated side is sent to a nearby town, and must return to the battlefield, build their own encampment and attempt to reclaim the artifact. The castle gates will not be fully "healed" yet, so there's always hope as long as the siege time is active.

Given the complexity of this Siege system, it's easy to forget that Lineage II also features a complete "normal" online RPG experience with hundreds of items, spells and skills—and all manner of Unreal-engine powered lands to explore while advancing your character alone or with friends. High-level support classes like Orc Overlords and Elven Elders will be key during Sieges, while Human Bladedancers are elite melee experts in crowds, Dark Elf Phantom Rangers have wicked bow skills, and Dwarven Warsmiths build sophisticated siege weapons highly valued by Castle Lords. Your path to greatness will inevitably yield abilities well-suited to the Castle Siege game.

The impact of Lineage II's sieges on the surrounding environment will be unprecedented in the genre. And while the road to that elite tier of the game certainly won't come easily, it's commendable that at high levels players will have this type of challenging, competitive gameplay available to them. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Team E & G

Publisher: NCsoft

Available: April



Only by fighting hard and strategizing well can you claim the mighty castle as your own.



City of Heroes

Preview

A super-powered break from the fantasy norm

City of Heroes is exactly what the MMORPG genre needs to expand beyond its core fanbase, and the timing couldn't be better. The allure of comic book adaptations has seized the mainstream, as folks connect with quirky super-powered characters fighting villains in modern urban settings. City of Heroes provides this experience with a cast of thousands, guided by a strong background story of mystical origins and evil schemes brewing, and through the stylish presentation of a huge metropolis teeming with activity. And CoH should pass the scrutiny of online RPG vets with flying colors, as the developers at Cryptic Studios have certainly been doing their homework.

City of Heroes clearly pulls a lot of elements from current MMO games, but the execution and presentation of these play mechanics often surpasses the source material. The character creation process is great. There's a staggering quantity of male and female body types, costume components and color schemes—and the models themselves are interesting. With virtually thousands of combinations, no two players should look alike. The class selection includes a set of five simple core archetypes: the ranged attack Blaster, the melee specialist Scraper, the healing Defender, the Controller who manages hostile crowds, and punishing close-range combat in the form of the Tanker. Your hero's powers may be derived from science, mutation, magic, technology or natural gifts, and this choice determines the selection of starting skills, and also your early path of quests and advancement in Paragon City. The entire creation and tutorial process is totally fleshed-out, and the game features an elegant and convenient interface.

These stylish and well-conceived options extend into the gameplay and world design. Characters can be controlled from a first- or third-person view with great precision, and the responsive strafing and jumping controls wouldn't be out of place in an action game. As you make "contacts" in the city and engage in missions, target locations are indicated on your compass and drop-down city map, so you're not running (and eventually flying) around aimlessly. Not that this would be an unwelcome experience, given the appealing Paragon City environments. While the engine isn't revolutionary, it's definitely solid, showcasing great draw distance, clean textures, good power effects and real-time shadows. There's a very good level-of-detail system in place here that allows the city to stay remarkably active—pedestrians and vehicles abound—while not incurring a significant performance hit.

"City of Heroes is exactly what the MMORPG genre needs to expand beyond its core fanbase, and the timing couldn't be better."



Despite excelling on so many fundamental levels, survivors in this genre succeed based on interesting character advancement and group dynamics. Each archetype allows for several unique specializations via Enhancements, so even when players choose exactly the same initial power sets, they may evolve their characters much differently. It all amounts to balanced team dynamics, as players group up to challenge tougher foes: while the Tanker goes in to take the brunt of pain, the Scraper and Blaster deal damage, the Controller puts enemies to sleep and the Defender increases the party's hitpoints. These are all very basic roles, however. Each archetype can bring surprising resources to the table once developed, allowing melee characters to slow and stun their opponents, while the Controller can also heal his allies and summon damaging storms. This variety helps to steer City of Heroes away from the linear group combinations plaguing other online RPGs, and provides all classes with the ability to play solo efficiently.

Cryptic and NCsoft are committed to nurturing the City of Heroes community, with character web profiles designed to encourage teaming up, and for large circles of friends, Super Groups and Task Forces can be assembled to face more daunting challenges. The true test for CoH will be its long-term depth, which will help to weather the storm of 2004's high-profile massively multiplayer releases. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Cryptic Studios

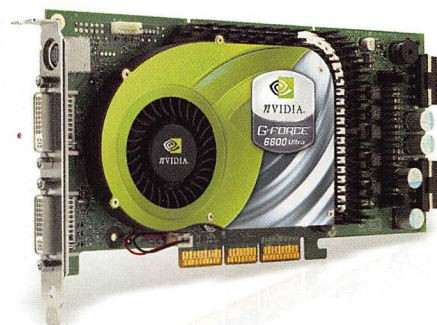
Publisher: NCsoft

Available: April

Postscript

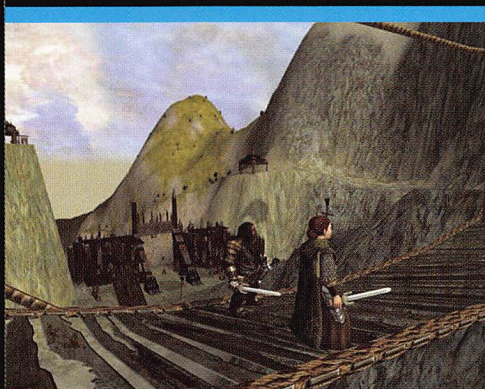
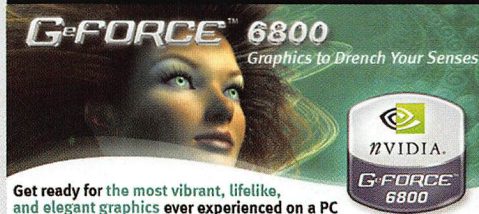
Nvidia Introduces the Geforce 6800

Nvidia has taken the initiative in the next leg of the video card wars, loading up their big guns with the release of the all-powerful Geforce 6800 Ultra. Trusted benchmarking sites are calling the 6800 one of the most dramatic performance leaps in PC hardware...ever. This beast will fully embrace the latest feature sets of Direct X 9, destined to power the most visually demanding games this year. We're talking Doom 3, and scenes with tons of light sources and per pixel shading, moving at over eight times the speed of previous-generation cards. It's such an almighty chipset, in fact, that no game this year is likely to seriously tax it at the highest quality settings. As we go to press, ATI remains tight-lipped regarding their next generation hardware based on the R420 chipset, but they'll be hard-pressed to compete with Nvidia's 6800 Ultra series.



SPECS

Graphics Core	256-bit
Memory Interface	256-bit
Memory Bandwidth	35.2 GB/sec.
Fill Rate	6.4 billion texels/sec.
Vertices per Second	600 million
Memory Data Rate	1100 MHz
Pixels per Clock (peak)	16
Textures per Pixel	16
RAMDACs	400 MHz



Middle Earth Online delayed

VU Games and Turbine have agreed to spend additional time and resources on their Lord of the Rings-inspired online RPG, Middle Earth Online. Although no firm release date has been set, the previous October 2004 retail date will no longer be fulfilled. The extra development period will be used to add significantly more content and, according to VU, "more nuanced touches to the world." Another positive side effect is a lengthened beta period, to come later this year.



NCsoft to continue MMO trend at E3

Joining Lineage 2, City of Heroes and Guild Wars at E3, NCsoft is showing an updated Tabula Rasa and two all-new MMO titles. Richard "Lord British" Garriot (of Ultima fame) and his Destination Games team are preparing a promising sequence for Tabula Rasa. Although little is known about this massively multiplayer game set in a unique hybrid "technorganic" world, the alien character designs will be far removed from Ultima's high fantasy settings. Garriot is committed to eliminating tedious downtime and excessive time investments for little reward. Tabula Rasa will feature an adaptive soundtrack by ex-Nine Inch Nails drummer/programmer Chris Vrenna. Auto Assault, in development at NetDevil, brings a futuristic Mad Max-style world to the MMO circuit, where players trick out their bikes, cars and semis to take on mutants and bandits. This innovative combination of vehicular combat and role-playing skillsets will have massive race vs. race wars for control of barren post-apocalyptic Earth, and feature the ubiquitous Havok physics engine to add flavor to explosions and breakneck vehicle stunts. Finally,

NPD Top PC Games

Sales figures 4/5/04 to 4/11/04

01	MS Flight Simulator 2004: CoF	microsoft
02	Call Of Duty	activation
03	Lord of the Rings: Return Of The King	ea
04	Age Of Mythology	microsoft
05	The Sims Deluxe	ea
06	Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection	microsoft
07	Hoyle Casino 2004	vu games
08	The Sims: Makin' Magic Expansion Pack	ea
09	Rise Of Nations	microsoft
10	Halo: Combat Evolved	microsoft



Cryptic Studios is already busy preparing the first expansion pack for their superhero online role-playing game, City of Heroes. Featuring the enhanced bad guys of seedy syndicate zones, City of Villains will allow players to take on those goodie-two-shoes heroes with their own criminal mastermind.



World Tour Soccer 2005

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: 989 Sports

Publisher: Sony
Available: April

With top-tier soccer titles from Konami and EA Sports already dominating the playing field, one would wonder why 989 Sports would even bother to come out with one of their own. Bottom line—989 is on a roll. With solid releases under their belt, including NBA Shootout and MLB, 989 Sports is finally gaining some ground in the ever-competitive sports game market and, without question, World Tour Soccer 2005 continues this trend... albeit with a few shortcomings.

Those looking for the same arcade-like experience from 989's previous game (WTS 2003) should look elsewhere this time around. Players are now required to have some modicum of skill if they want to control the ball with any sort of competence. With incredibly aggressive AI, players are forced to pass the ball more frequently to move it up the pitch. WTS 2005 gives players an exhaustive arsenal of passing options and a plethora of offensive moves to keep defenders on their toes. Icon passing has been incorporated to assist on goal kicks, corners and throw-ins. Pressure-sensitive controls also add to the realism. Another key innovation is the ability to change offensive and defensive strategies on the fly via the right analog stick. In addition to the typical exhibition, season and career modes, WTS 2005 has a great Challenge Mode that

lets advanced players show their stuff. Players earn points for various skills, including ball handling, passes, tackles and, of course, goals. Using skillful strategies and solid fundamentals will reward players with a password, which can later be used to log online to see how you fair against other players.

Although 989 has improved the overall gameplay in WTS 2005, it's definitely lacking in other areas. My biggest gripe lies with the camera. Much like in the previous game, players are limited to two views—sideline or top down. Unfortunately, the way the camera is angled, it's nearly impossible to see what's in front of you, which in turn hinders your ability to set up plays and strategies.

Another flaw is the lack of any sort of online play. With the extensive network 989 Sports has created for their other titles, not having any sort of online play in WTS 2005 is unacceptable. Hopefully they'll include it next year.

In the end, while World Tour Soccer 2005 may not play better than Winning Eleven 7, it's certainly a nice alternative to EA's FIFA.

Tom Ham B

"...it's certainly a nice alternative to EA's FIFA."

"Visually, the SlugFest series has always looked damn good..."

MLB SlugFest: Loaded

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Midway

Publisher: Midway
Available: June

Baseball season just wouldn't be right without a dose of over-the-top arcade action from the good folks at Midway. Their latest not only takes the series in a much-needed direction—online—it also showcases new modes, improved gameplay and enhanced graphics.

The biggest change for MLB SlugFest: Loaded is the inclusion of online play. Both PS2 and Xbox owners can go online and have at it. In addition to being able to play online, players will be treated to up-to-the-minute stats scrolling across their screen—courtesy of MLB.com. Gameplay was relatively stutter-free, and unlike some other sports games, the framerate remained at a constant high level. Oh yeah, both versions support voice chat as well.

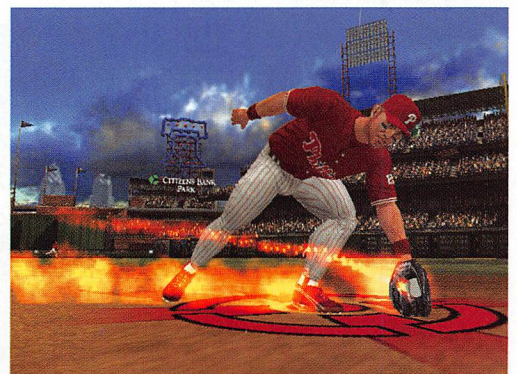
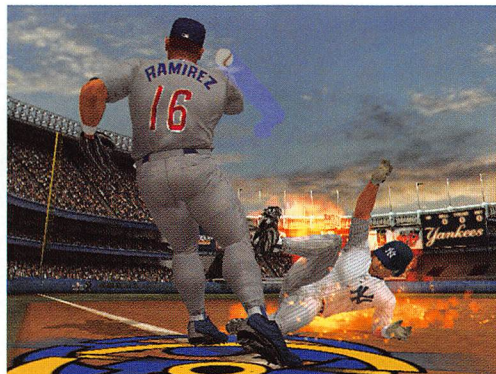
My favorite feature in Loaded is the incredibly deep Baseball Mogul mode (it's Midway's fancy way of saying franchise mode). Here players can sign free agents, simulate a season and even run a team for more than 100 seasons. Players can check out news headlines about their players and perform trades to beef up their roster. Although it may seem odd to have a franchise mode in an arcade-based title, it works surprisingly well in Loaded.

Adding a dash of simulation to the game is the updated pitching system. Players can either pitch like before (icon based) or they can utilize a pitch meter that will show the accuracy of their pitches. This works incredibly well when you want to fake out your opponent—even though your cursor shows "ball," you can change your aim at the last second to force a swing. What if you don't want to play with

all of the crazy antics of SlugFest? Players can now turn all of that off and play a regular game of baseball.

Visually, the SlugFest series has always looked damn good and Loaded is no exception. New animations such as diving catches and off-the-wall grabs bring the game to a new level—and the exploding scoreboards are a really nice touch.

And SlugFest just wouldn't be SlugFest without the antics of Tim Kitzrow and Jim Shorts. Together they have some of the funniest play-by-play I've ever heard. I just wish they would bring Tim back to do NFL Blitz. **Tom Ham A**



Shining Force: Resurrection of the Dark Dragon

Review

This classic strategy game really does shine

I never expected myself to become so completely hooked on this remake of Sega's classic strategy-RPG. The grid-based battles are simple, the ideas nothing new—yet Shining Force becomes completely absorbing through its world, characters and thoughtful gameplay. Even though the original hit more than a decade ago, few games since have managed to combine the tactical battles of a strategy game with the exploration and interaction of an RPG as well as SF does; gaining new warriors, earning new weapons and strengthening your small army is thoroughly addictive. Better yet, the developers haven't just been content to port the game directly in its Genesis form. The colorful, anime-style graphics have received an expectedly nice overhaul (though they still can't quite carry the weight of the somewhat dark story), but more importantly, the GBA

version actually adds new characters, new missions and new story elements into the otherwise familiar mix. Princess Narsha ends up being one of the most useful characters in the game, while Mawlock's card-using abilities bring completely new aspects to the formula. It's too bad this new card system is just restricted to one character, but it's a nice addition nonetheless. Fans of the original will love re-exploring the enhanced world of Rune; and for players who've never really enjoyed strategy games before...there's never been a better time. **Chris Hoffman B+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Amusement Vision (Sega)
Publisher: Atlus
Available: June



Battles like these are what Shining Force is all about.

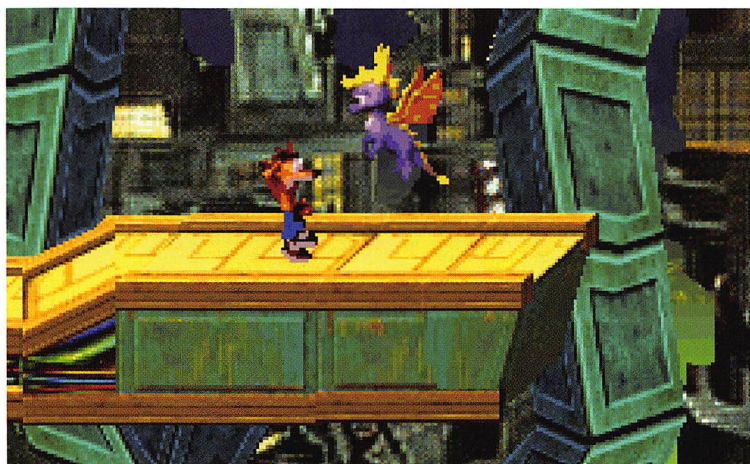
Spyro Orange: The Cortex Conspiracy

Review

As I played through Spyro Orange, it seemed at first to be a fairly typical platformer with a fixation on minigames and an interesting crossover premise. Sure, it's a platformer with little challenge to speak of, loose control and lackluster level design that seemed little more than a utility for connecting the minigames, but it seemed OK, especially for players weary of Spyro's isometric GBA offerings. And then I got to what should have been the last level. However, instead of proceeding to that final stage, I was told to backtrack through the entire game, beat every minigame two more times, and then trudge all the way back. Sorry, but that's not fun—that's lazy design and artificial lengthening through tedious repetition. **Chris Hoffman C-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Vicarious Visions

Publisher: VU Games
Available: June



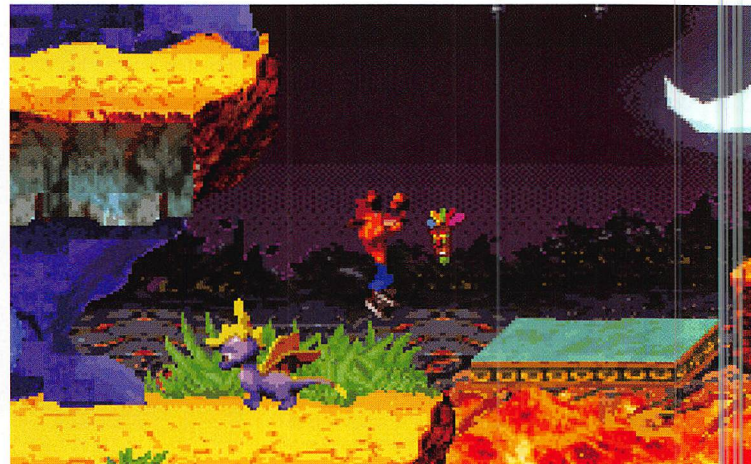
Crash Bandicoot Purple: Ripto's Rampage

Review

When compared to its crossover cousin, Spyro Orange, Crash Purple is clearly a superior game. The controls are much more responsive and the difficulty more appropriate, simply through the fact that Crash can't take as many hits as his purple counterpart. The title still focuses on minigames—both Crash and Spyro would have been better if the minigames had actually been integrated amidst the platforming instead of feeling tacked on—and though the level design isn't mind-blowing, it's not bad. But most significantly, the backtracking portion only occurs if you skip objectives as you play through the levels, and has been changed from a lesson in repetition to a lesson in skill. It still feels cheap, but it's much easier to stomach. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Vicarious Visions

Publisher: VU Games
Available: June



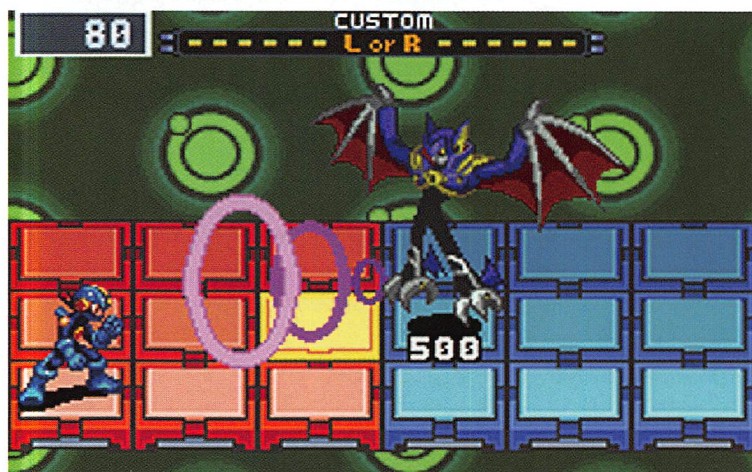
Mega Man Battle Network 4: Red Sun & Blue Moon

Review

Now in its fourth installment in not quite as many years, Mega Man Battle Network is back yet again. By now you probably know what to expect—a quality, kid-friendly role-playing game that combines action and strategy into its cyberspace-based virus-busting adventures. As is par for the Mega Man course, some incremental changes are found here, such as Soul Unions, Dark Chips, counter attacks and an emotional status indicator for Mega Man, all adding slightly more depth to the proceedings, making this in some ways better than previous MMBN games. However, this iteration still hasn't fixed the one problem that's been plaguing the series since its inception: snooze-inducing level design. Another decent entry in the series, but nothing more. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom

Publisher: Capcom
Available: June



Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories

Preview

Linking the PS2 original to its upcoming sequel, Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories continues the journey of Sora and friends through the magical SquareSoft/Disney universe, including worlds drawn from *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. But now, things have gotten a bit darker; a mysterious voice has called out to Sora in the night, drawing him toward a "castle filled with emptiness" where his destiny awaits. New to the GBA Kingdom Hearts is a renovated combat system featuring card-based battles, plus Square Enix promises new technology that will create vocal sound effects and movie cutscenes of unprecedented quality on GBA. This should keep fans occupied until Kingdom Hearts II hits. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Jupiter

Publisher: Square Enix
Available: Winter 2004



River City Ransom EX

Review

Rarely have I reviewed a game that's as subjective as River City Ransom EX. Those who love it will be those who still enjoy the classic NES version of the game and/or who take pleasure in spending hours building up their character, earning cash and learning what items and moves provide the best bang for their hard-earned buck. Players who hate it will focus on the rather stiff, clunky fighting, the unimpressive graphics and the game's short length. But those players are missing the point—with hundreds of items and RPG-like stat-tracking, side-scrolling beat-'em-ups just don't get any deeper than this. And with tons of options and new features like CPU allies, this version is even better than the endearing original. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Million

Publisher: Atlus
Available: June



Mario Pinball

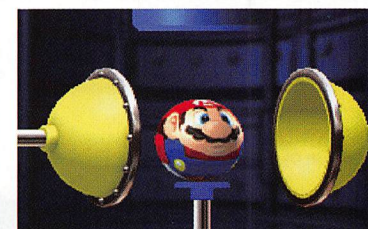
Preview

Remember way back in the day, when Mario had that side gig bouncing a ball off his head in the bonus round of the original NES Pinball? Well, it took nearly 20 years, but now Mario is getting back into the pinball game in the appropriately named Mario Pinball. The difference this time is that Mario is the main focus—in fact, he's been sucked into another dimension and turned into the ball. The isometric play fields are all drawn from the Mario universe, and Mario will have to overcome all sorts of challenges to make it through, including collecting Star Keys, buying special items and bouncing off famous Mario enemies like Goombas and Monty Moles. There will even be nasty bosses to defeat.

Chris Hoffman

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Fuse

Publisher: Nintendo
Available: Q4 2004



Gunslinger Girl Vol. 1

"The girl has a mechanical body. However, she is still an adolescent child."

At first glance, Gunslinger Girl may look like a game about adolescent female contract killers, when it's actually about adolescent female *cyborg* contract killers, based on a Japanese TV show and manga about brainwashed girls without any relatives, who are being prepared as professional assassins and given mechanical bodies. Not that that makes it any less disturbing as the cute little girls blow people's heads off and take damage, but hey, Japan isn't the messed up, crime-addled society we are. They can decipher between science fiction and reality just fine without getting all in a huff about their nation's youth. Save it to say, you will likely never see this game in the U.S., which is a shame, because if you're into duck-and-cover, it's pretty darn cool—although, when I say duck-and-cover, I mean strictly duck-and-cover. Gunslinger Girl is highly produced and wonderfully cinematic, but pretty much a gun game without the gun. You get to move the "girls" from place to place for position, but otherwise it's strictly target practice. It's well fleshed-out though, and interspersed with diverse enemy types, vehicles and environments such as outdoor cafés that take on real-time damage. If you can forget that you're controlling suffering little girls with nothing to live for converted into cold-blooded killers, this game may just be for you. Ask for the collector's edition, by the way; it comes with an incredible art book and episodes from the anime series.

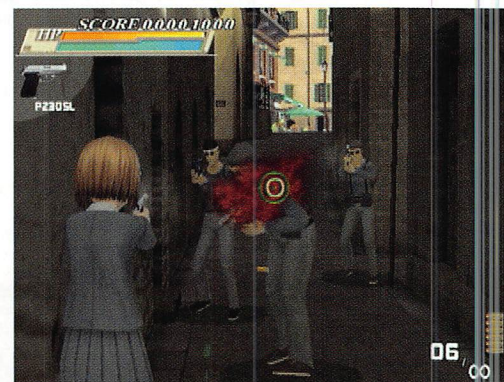
Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Marvelous Ent. Inc.

Publisher: Bandai

Available: April



Takahashi Meijin No Boukenjima (Adventure Island)

Go with the flow

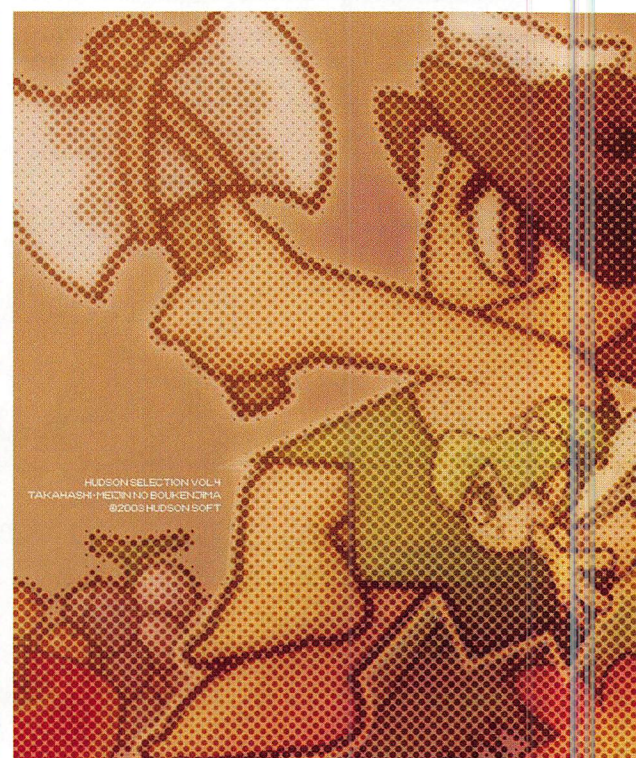
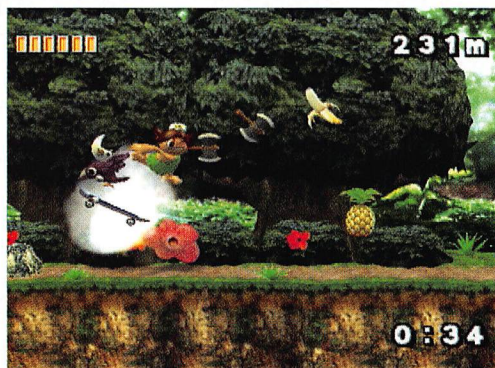
Anyone who wonders what old-school gamers mean when they reminisce about how simple things used to be...how a single play mechanic could carry an entire game...needs to pick up this import. Adventure Island is the poster child for the unholy union of speed vs. cleverly timed obstacles vs. jumping. That's all you do, and man, is it ever addicting, even to this day. Now, I'm sure there are those who would disagree, but there's something to be said for earning your way just to glimpse the next area or level—once the cornerstone of action gaming. Bringing this fascination up to modern standards, complete with between-level saves (!), Adventure Island is the single best graphical upgrade I've seen among the Sega Ages and Hudson Selection retreads, and the music is nearly as good as the Yuzo Koshiro tunes from Super Adventure Island. If you like to run, jump and think on your feet, I highly recommend this stroll down memory lane. Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube (reviewed)

Developer: Hudson

Publisher: Hudson

Available: December 2003



Run, jump, throw, repeat...



play anime

.hack//

Legend of the Twilight

This is a very good sign

Four years have passed since "The Twilight," during which "The World" has become a different place...safer and more structured...or so it would seem. Enter Shugo and his twin sister Rena, winners of a recent contest to use the character likenesses of the now legendary Black Rose and Kite. Initially Shugo—post junior high, and his parents' recent split separating him and Rena—figures he's done with video games, but we soon find out his displeasure with gaming is largely due to his failure to read manuals...for shame. When a level 48 armored super shogun shows up in the newbie area, it's not long before he's beaten down, and we discover that The World is as glitchy and potentially dangerous as ever. The preface leads us to believe that "game over" in the virtual world leads to a comatose state in the real world, and Shugo seems destined for that dark purgatory when Aura pulls him back, bestowing upon him a very special item to even the score.

.hack is back on, and, dare I say, better than ever. These episodes are so brimming with gaming goodness that watching this RPG is almost as fun as playing one, especially once Mirielle (keeper of rare items and all-around worthy party member), Lord Balmung (still pulling the strings and writing the code) and Ohka (hot tempered, hotter body) show up to help guide Shugo and Rena through their harrowing experience in the world. .hack// Legend of The Twilight has the same down-the-wormhole feel as the original, only it's better animated, faster paced and a bit cheekier than the original. It also wears its SD elements very well and looks like it will translate even better into a real-world RPG if indeed one is planned.

Dave Halverson **A-**

Studio: Bandai Entertainment

Rating: 13 & Up

Running Time: 100 Minutes

Volume: 1



"...it's not long before he's beaten down, and we discover that The World is as glitchy and potentially dangerous as ever."

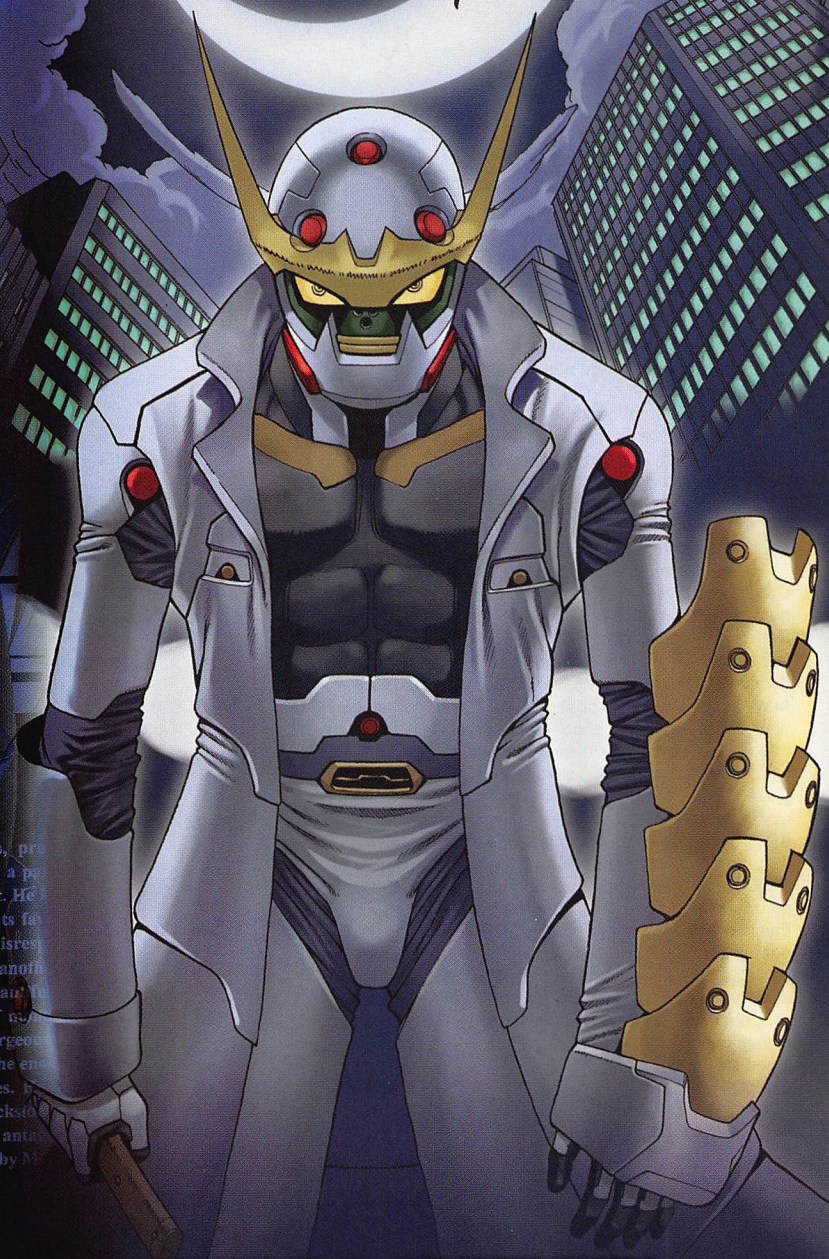
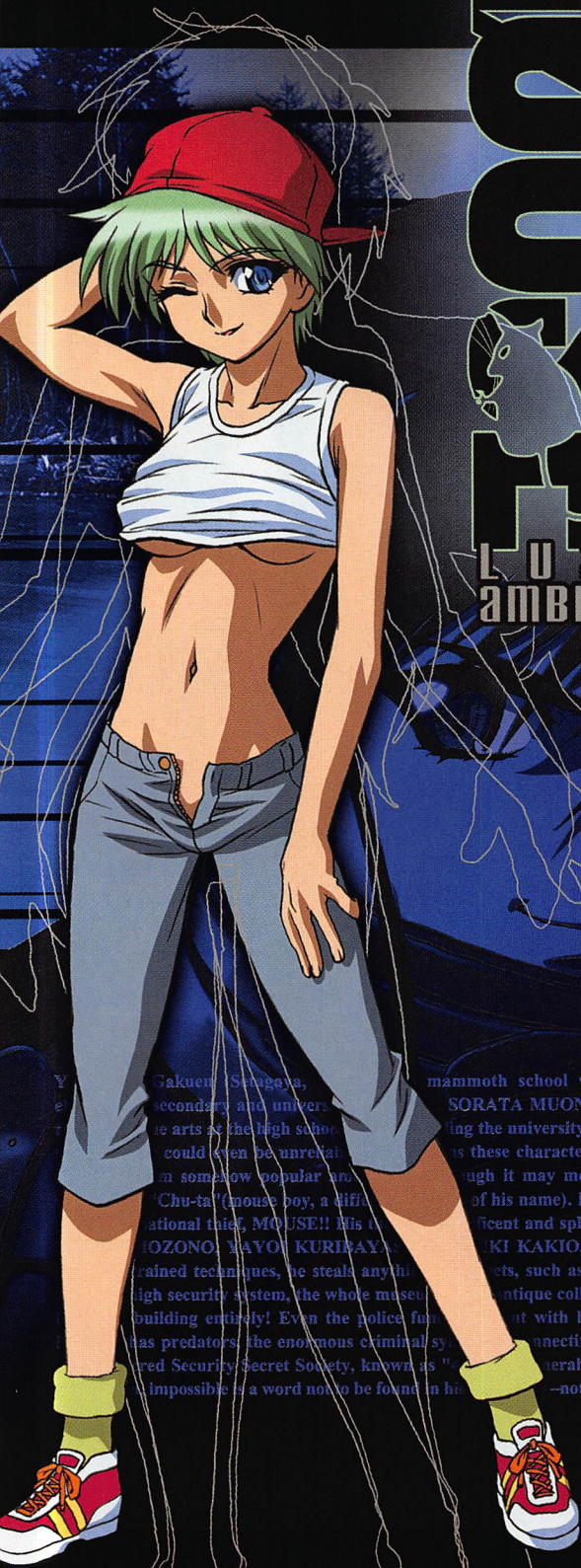
No security is too tight
for Mouse to penetrate

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HELMET BABY

SADAMITSU

THE DESTROYER

LOST
AMBITIONS



VOLUME 3: SHOWDOWN



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Gad Guard

Romancing the stone

If Gonzo gets any hotter, they may just burn a hole in the atmosphere. Once again, within mere seconds of watching their latest creation, *Gad Guard*, I was completely dumbfounded by the imagery they put up on screen. From their latest take on mecha, called Heavy Metal, to a softly lit neon street assault by scooter, motorized skateboard and Vespa, GG is absolutely gorgeous from minute one, spilling over with a dark, future noir look that's sure to help catapult anime ever further into the U.S. mainstream.

"Gad" are small, square magical stones (resembling a GameCube logo) which, once spiritually bonded with a human host, produce one sweet-looking mech unit, looking like a cross between Tetsujin and something you might fight in a sealed room playing Mega Man. One such stone is the anchor of episode one, as we witness what people will do to obtain one (which is nothing short of murder), along with what happens when it chooses a host, which in this case happens to be a skater/delivery boy named Hajiki Sanada, who works to support his single mother and sister in a place called Night Town—a small, electrically challenged city (hence the name) where light is in short supply. Before the lights go down on episode 1, the characters we meet assure that loads of intrigue lie in wait, although, much like *SoulTaker*, something tells me that much of the goings on will be left to personal interpretation. Every now and then Gonzo will introduce a core ideal and then assault our senses with a patchwork of corresponding situations, and *Gad Guard* seems to be of that ilk. Then again, our screener contained only one episode, so there's a measure of speculation in that assessment. Wherever it goes, with animation, ambience and design this sweet, I'll be positively glued for the duration.

Dave Halverson **A-**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment

Rating: 13 & Up

Running Time: 100 Minutes

Volume: 1



You'd be happy too if you just took control of your very own Heavy Metal!

"Before the lights go down on episode 1, the characters we meet assure that loads of intrigue lie in wait..."

FINAL 5 EPISODES

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URBAN VISION
ENTERTAINMENT

Blue Gender The Warrior

And the meek shall re-inherit the Earth

Blue Gender was definitely a strong series when it debuted back in 2001, although it took a great deal of commitment to follow from episode to episode as the story went through its rigorous character development; where some shows lack any at all, if anything, *Blue Gender* had too much. Whether you've seen the original or not, *Blue Gender: The Warrior* is requisite viewing. Not only does it cut to the chase much quicker, but as a result, the overall weight of the story hits harder... When that last scene fades to black, you will feel a sense of what the producers originally intended.

The story of *Blue Gender* chronicles the plight of Yuji, a "Sleeper" (citizens of Earth put into suspended animation after becoming afflicted with a rare disease somehow connected with gigantic arachnid invaders from space called The Blue), and Marlene, a cold-hearted soldier whose mission is to deliver "the sample" (Yuji) to second Earth, the orbiting space station that the hierarchy of the human race fled to, to re-group and fight the bug. At its core, the story is about how Yuji helps Marlene find her humanity at the expense of his own, amidst the direst of circumstances. Part sci-fi and part human drama, both elements of *Blue Gender* deliver big via the re-cut movie format. Less, in this case, has proven to be much, much more.

Dave Halverson **B**

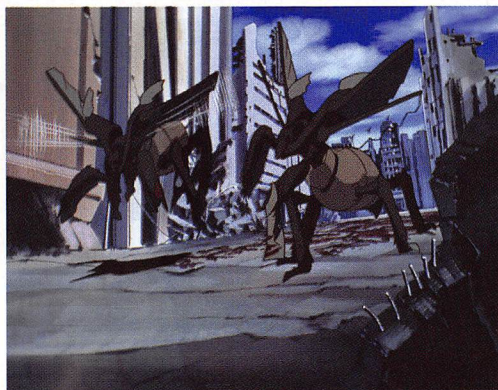
Studio: Funimation

Rating: 15 & Up

Running Time: 120 Minutes



"When that last scene fades to black, you will feel a sense of what the producers originally intended."



The epitome of tough love: Yuji, Marlene and the assault suit that threatens to rip them apart.

R.O.O.D

THE TV

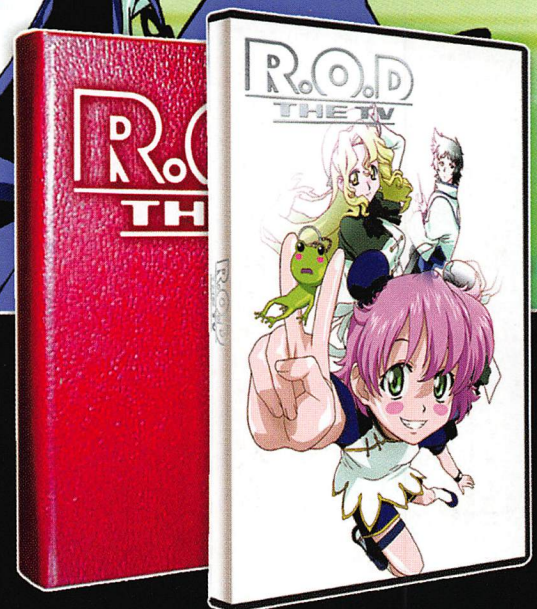


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Girls gone wild

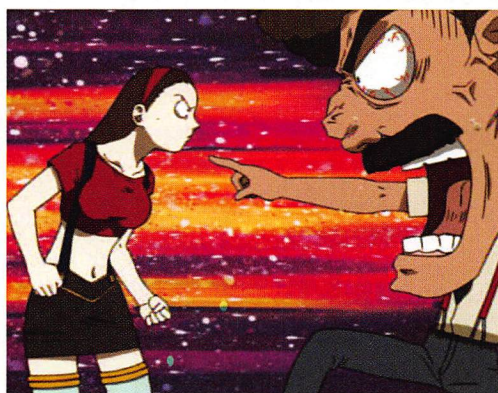
Yao Sakurakouji is too rich for her own good. Just how rich? Well, when a bank robber takes a baby hostage, she buys the bank just so she can blow it up. Daddy has money. Together with her polar opposite—the deadpan, stick-in-the-mud Lu Amano (who also happens to be the daughter of Miami's afro-sporting, newly white police chief)—they compose the oddest couple since the *Dirty Pair* in a series of cop-show spoofs that make *Burn-Up* seem tame by comparison. The one thing they do have in common is hot bodies, and as far as this type of show is concerned, that's half the battle. Some call it fan service, others gag anime, but it's really just wacky, sex-charged parody—so far over the top it exists on a plain of un-reality all its own. And is it ever yummy here.

Set several decades after the world is nearly decimated by alien invaders circa 1999, things look and feel pretty much like the present—no giant mechs, no super powers, and rampant crime—since mankind (or at least those who could afford it) has been floating around in space. Soon after the rebuilding of Miami, however, the riff raff seeped right back in, giving rise to a renegade police force that looks and acts more like a perv-squad than keepers of the peace, of which Yao and Lu are front and center. Directed by Yoshitaka Koyama of *Rune Soldier* fame, *Miami Guns DVD Volume 1*—a spin-off based on the manga from *RahXephon* creator Takeaki Momoose—spoofs every cop show cliché in the book (along with a luscious stab at *Initial D*) while sending up everything from homosexuality (can I say that post-Janet?) to police brutality. But don't expect a boob-fest; there's nary a jiggle to behold and gratuitous panty shots are kept to a bare minimum. *Miami Guns* is more *Ping Pong Club* meets *Dirty Pair* than a *Burn-Up* clone, opting for mega violence, devious villains and sharp toilet humor over wall-to-wall sex. I'll take it any way I can get it.

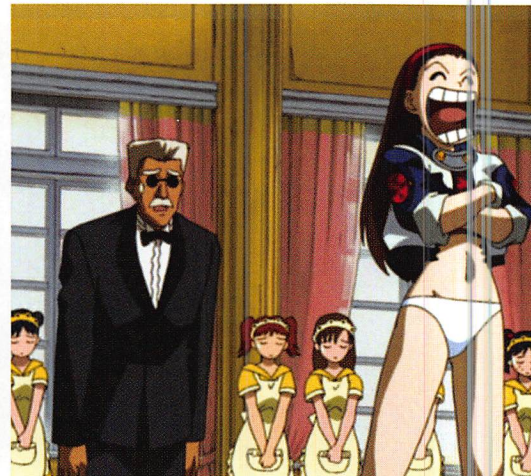
Dave Halverson B

Studio: AN Entertainment
Rating: 17 & Up
Running Time: 100 Minutes
Volume: 1

"Just how rich? Well, when a bank robber takes a baby hostage, she buys the bank just so she can blow it up."



Seems like the chief is a little angry—a common occurrence whenever Yao is around.



GONZO 10TH ANNIVERSARY
(CREATORS OF BLUE SUBMARINE NO. 6 AND HELLSING)



The main illustration features a sleek, dark grey fighter jet with red and white markings, flying diagonally across the frame. A pilot in a white flight suit and helmet is visible in the cockpit. In the background, a large, faint profile of a man's face is visible on the left. The title '雪風' is written in large, stylized white Japanese calligraphy, with 'YUKIKAZE' in a red, metallic, 3D font below it.

雪風 YUKIKAZE

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Tokyo Godfathers

Homeless but not heartless

Interview Satoshi Kon, Director



play: First of all, I must congratulate you on a magical film.

Satoshi Kon: Thank you very much for your generous words.

Tokyo Godfathers bridges the gap between anime and mainstream Western cinema very well. While all of your films seem to touch us on different levels, *Tokyo Godfathers* has a very human quality about it. As far as this film is concerned, this film wasn't based on anything particular. I wrote a story based on what I saw and experienced through my life.

The main characters are so very expressive in this film, especially Hana. Are the character designs and animation actually built around the dialogue? In some parts, it seems that way, but I didn't create this film solely based on dialogues. It was a result of compiling various elements of the story.

Are you at all familiar with the director, Blake Edwards? This film reminded me so much of some of his earlier work.

I'm familiar with Mr. Blake Edwards. However, the title of *Tokyo Godfathers* came from director John Ford's *Three Godfathers*, and the story structure is rather similar to that film.

After *Perfect Blue*, *Millennium Actress* and now *Tokyo Godfathers*, do you see yourself ever delving into fantasy or science fiction, or do you prefer human drama?

I don't have any specific plan to make a science fiction film. I don't particularly prefer human dramas, but I just work on what I want to produce most at that time.

From where do you draw your knowledge of human nature?

I didn't study anything in particular for this film; it is based on what I have seen and experienced in my life.

How long does it take to create something as complex as this with so many crowd shots?

It took about two and half years.

Is applying hand-painted veneers to computer-generated backgrounds a difficult process? The effect is striking.

It's not a specifically difficult process, but I believe it is the product of advanced science.

Do they find the lottery ticket?

Ah; please watch the film and find out. **play**

The latest feature film from Satoshi Kon (*Perfect Blue*, *Millennium Actress*), adapted from Jon Ford's silent film, *Three Godfathers*, *Tokyo Godfathers* is not your typical anime, nor animated film. In fact, it is quite unlike anything you've likely ever seen or experienced: a bittersweet film of astonishing perspective, about three homeless bums that discover a newborn child and endeavor to find its mother. As it warms the heart (in between giving it mild heart attacks), they keep reminding us that they're "homeless bums,

not action movie heroes," but they certainly are more interesting. A combination of masterful traditional animation and subtle digital effects, *Tokyo Godfathers* is a joy to see and feel as it builds to one of the best climaxes ever put on film. **Dave Halverson A-**

Studio: Columbia Tristar
Rating: PG-13
Running Time: 92 Minutes



"...*Tokyo Godfathers* is a joy to see and feel as it builds to one of the best climaxes ever put on film."

ORIGINAL VIDEO ANIMATION

メガゾーン23

MEGAZONE 23

REALITY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER.

Welcome to *Megazone 23*, where nothing is what it seems—this is a truth that street racer Shogo Yahagi has just confronted head-on. The world that he's lived in his entire life is a lie, the military is hot on his heels and his only chance for survival lies with a stolen robot motorcycle and an artificial intelligence that may or may not be telling him the truth. It's a deadly race against time as Shogo must find a way to break the iron curtain of secrecy that surrounds the Megazone, before its keepers silence him forever.



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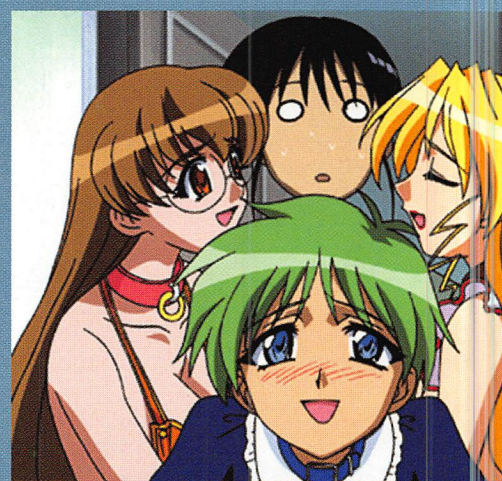
www.advfilms.com

Mouse

There's nothing mousy about these dirty pairs

If you like your anime big-, no, huge-breasted, then *Mouse*, about a legendary thief and three gorgeous girls sworn to protect him, two of whom bounce their gigantic mammaries all over the screen and service him every chance they get—is for you. High school professor by day, Sōrata, aka Mouse, is the 20th-generation progeny in a family of legendary thieves, so cunning and thievish there is literally nothing he can't steal, from entire buildings to closely guarded jewels, even when they're ready for him. So Bond-tastic is he that there's an entire facility built under the school where he works, dedicated to his protection, where the all-powerful memory-manipulating machine Turtle Recall is housed, just in case anyone gets wise. And seeing how he's got a police chief infatuated with his every move on his tail at all times, that's likely. Sound a bit like *Lupin*? Well, it is, but it's not. *Lupin* is supremely clever while *Mouse* is really all about fan service—an in-your-face boob-a-thon of the superfluous kind that weighs in more on the way-over-the-top side of the scale. Not that there's anything wrong with that. **Dave Halverson** 

Studio: Media Blasters
Rating: 16 and up
Running Time: 90 minutes
Volume: 1



"...an in-your-face boob-a-thon of the superfluous kind..."

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10 current series you gotta have



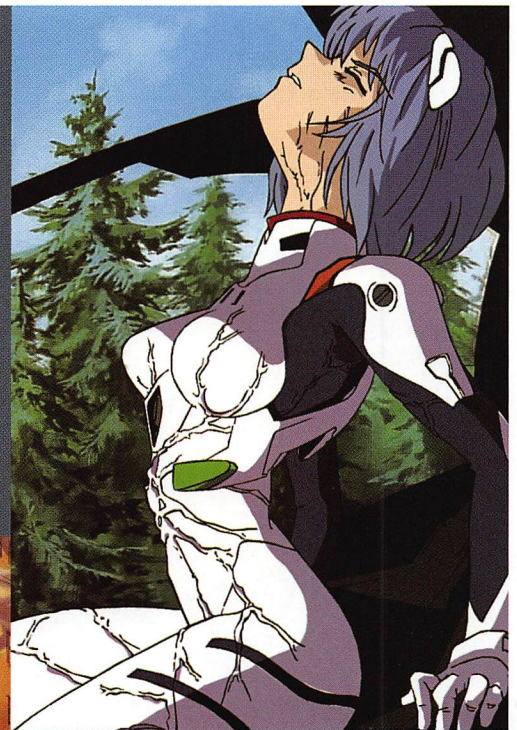
Burn Up Excess Warrior Case Files
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Collector's Box
 With all 13 episodes available now in one collector's case, who can resist the latest from Rio and company?



Final Fantasy Unlimited
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Volume 6
 After five "phases," *FFU* is finally growing on me. For 12-and-up fare, it definitely has an edge to it. It's not what I wanted, but the wormhole is getting deeper.



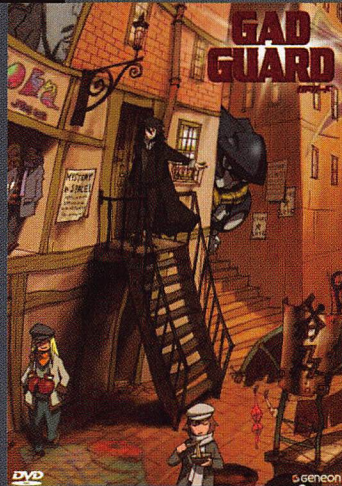
Initial D
Studio: Tokyopop
Now Playing: Volume 4
D puts the zoom, zoom, zoom in anime and has a helluva lot of fun doing it. Remember: never operate a motor vehicle while under the influence of *Initial D*.



Neon Genesis Evangelion: Director's Cut
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Genesis Reborn
 Still looking for answers? Well, you won't find them here, but you'll definitely get closer. The second coming is at hand! Don't miss the real event!



.hack//Legend of the Twilight
Studio: Bandai Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 1
 Think you know The World? Well, think again, or better yet, let Shugo and Rena guide you. They're certainly dressed for it!



Gad Guard
Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 1
 It's exciting, new and from Gonzo; what more could you ask for? Oh, and tiny magical stones blossom into giant robots and bond with people.



Ninja Scroll TV
Studio: Urban Vision
Now Playing: Volume 3
 After a lackluster Volume 2, *Ninja Scroll Volume 3* promises to button things up with all of the grace under pressure and goey monsters you can swing a katana at!

future shock



Dead Leaves
Studio: Manga Entertainment
Release Date: July
 They haven't invested a word yet for how mind-meltingly amazing *Dead Leaves* is. By next month I'll hopefully have come up with a way to describe it.



Neo Ranga
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Concluded
 In case you missed it, the entire series is out there, containing one of the most original and unique mecha tales, along with three beautiful heroines.



Kino's Journey
Studio: ADV Films
Now Playing: Volume 2
 Join Kino and company (namely her talking motorcycle) as she goes on surreal adventures and meets fascinating people—some of whom may want to kill her.



Miami Guns
Studio: AN Entertainment
Now Playing: Volume 1
 There's trouble in new Miami and it's up to two slinky babes to take a bite out of crime; one's an ass and one's a pain in it.

animedatabase

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

- 01 **Tokyo Godfathers** *columbia tristar*
- 02 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 03 **Heat Guy J** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **.hack//Legend of the Twilight** *bandai ent.*
- 05 **Initial D** *tokyopop*
- 06 **Space Pirate Captain Herlock** *geneon ent.*
- 07 **Inuyasha** *viz llc*
- 08 **Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
- 09 **Saikano** *viz llc*
- 10 **Saint Seiya** *adv films*



Play Magazine Top Ten

- 01 **Dead Leaves** *manga entertainment*
- 02 **.hack//Legend of the Twilight** *bandai ent.*
- 03 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Azumanga Daioh** *adv films*
- 05 **Gad Guard** *geneon entertainment*
- 06 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*
- 07 **Space Pirate Captain Herlock** *geneon ent.*
- 08 **Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi** *adv films*
- 09 **Comic Party** *right stuf*
- 10 **Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*



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Saikano
viz llc

VIZ unleashes Gonzo Digimation's Saikano this month, a CG/digimation amalgam overflowing with romantic heroes and action-packed adventure. And if you like the anime, you won't have to wait long for the manga; it launches in June.



Tokyo Godfathers
columbia tristar

Satoshi Kon's bittersweet human drama is must-see regardless of whether or not you're an anime fan.

Dave Halverson

- 01 **Dead Leaves** *manga entertainment*
- 02 **Gad Guard** *geneon entertainment*
- 03 **Ghost in the Shell: Innocence** *dreamworks*
- 04 **Tokyo Godfathers** *columbia tristar*
- 05 **.hack//Legend of the Twilight** *bandai ent.*



Christina Alexander

- 01 **Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
- 02 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 03 **Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi** *adv films*
- 04 **Doggy Poo** *central park media*
- 05 **Comic Party** *right stuf*



Nelson Lui

- 01 **.hack//Legend of the Twilight** *bandai ent.*
- 02 **Azumanga Daioh** *adv films*
- 03 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation production*
- 05 **Comic Party** *right stuf*



Reader's Anime Top Five

- 01 **Ninja Scroll TV** *urban vision*
- 02 **Final Fantasy Unlimited** *adv films*
- 03 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
- 04 **Initial D** *tokyopop*
- 05 **Space Pirate Captain Herlock** *geneon ent.*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

- 01 **Berserk** *dark horse manga*
- 02 **D.N. Angel** *tokyopop manga*
- 03 **Galaxy Angel** *broccoli books*
- 04 **Psychic Academy** *tokyopop manga*
- 05 **Sgt. Frog** *tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

- 01 **.hack//Legend of Twilight OST** *bandai ent.*
- 02 **Wolf's Rain Original Soundtrack** *bandai ent.*
- 03 **Last Exile OST II Dolce Triade** *geneon anime music*
- 04 **Arjuna Earth Maiden OST** *geneon anime music*
- 05 **Gunparade March Soundtrack** *geneon anime music*

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play MEDIA

Interview

Bruce Campbell

The always-flamboyant cult favorite talks smack, special effects and Bubba Ho-Tep

by Brady Fiechter

play: My girlfriend asked me why I had to cancel our coffee to interview Bruce Campbell. She doesn't know who you are, but when I showed her your picture, she said you were hot.

Bruce Campbell: Well good. Thank you, even though she doesn't know who the f*** I was.

But seriously, what you do might not rile the world and get you on the cover of Rolling Stone, but damn if you don't have a great life.

Sure. I do what I have to do and I don't have to worry about it. I mean, a lot of people spend more time being famous than working. I'd rather just work.

And what you do does affect people's lives. You have the fans and the fanatics...

Oh, sure.

But you know, I certainly enjoyed all your movies from the beginning; love them for their uniquely special entertainment... You're affecting people's lives for a few

hours, sometimes well beyond. You make people laugh. That's pretty cool.

OK, I accept it all. I don't know. So, well, la-dee-da [laughs]. Having said that, we're done [laughs]. No, I'm kidding.

Definitely not done! So Bubba Ho-Tep. I'm a big fan of Army of Darkness, but I think Bubba has become my favorite of yours. You have a favorite?

I don't really have a favorite since I'm not done yet. You usually make those decisions from the old actors' home years later. But I have my top five sort of thing. And *Bubba's* definitely up there. It plays with an audience well, like the *Evil Dead* films. So in that respect, it's definitely up there. I've been touring with it and spending a lot of time promoting it. So I guess you've gotta love it.

Yeah, but you know, your performance was actually quite good. As an actor, it must have been a good experience.

Yeah, definitely. And it's a good part. With any actor, you're halfway home if you can get yourself a good part. It's a

really hard party trying to make a shitty part good. But it's not that hard of a job to take a good part and keep it good. The writer does most of the work, fortunately.

And it was such a strange script. You have to give props to the director for pulling it off; he had to direct what he wrote. Through the laughs, through the weird humor. It creeped you out a little bit.

Oh sure, yeah...

It was really well done.

Well, good. We all agreed early on that the tone was going to be straight. There wasn't going to be any winking. Elvis would say a few of his catchphrases, but it's not like every three seconds. The fun thing was playing him without the Memphis mafia, without all the adoring fans, without Colonel Parker, without Warner Bros. Just to see what his life was like as an old man who is infirm.

I definitely agree. It was good that he played it straight. So there was never going to be any wavering from that?

I don't think it would have worked at all. It would have been terrible. The script was already weird enough. It's hard enough just getting that across. Can you hold on one second? [Phone rings]

When I was looking through your filmography, it was interesting that you produced and said you basically cast yourself in *Night of the Living Dead*. You were 21. Going back, would you do anything different?

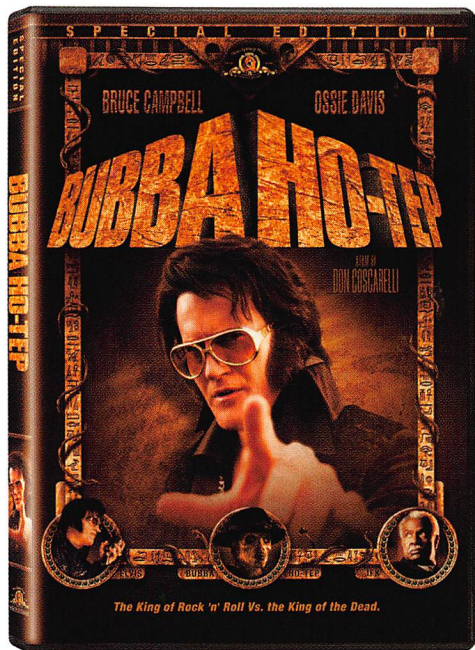
No. That's cheating anyway. It's like George Lucas going back and fixing his crappy effects he had in *Star Wars*. There's no going back. Every decision was a good decision at the time. When you're a broke actor, *Maniac Cop* is looking pretty good.

[laughs] That's definitely true.

Really, that's the reality of it, so why deny it. I hate it when actors... I worked with an actress—who shall remain nameless—who the second she got a real gig, on this big, famous TV series, it was as though she had never done anything before that. No Roger Corman movies, no low-budget movies. All the sudden she was just the famous actress. I love that. Rather than celebrating



Elvis (Campbell) and Jack (Ossie Davis) contemplate what to do when a soul-sucking mummy invades their rest home.



If you haven't seen Campbell's portrayal of the King yet, you can catch the DVD on May 25.

Well, look, there are a lot of mistakes people can make that no one really talks about. Which was one of the motivating factors for writing a book, so people could just read about it. And those people who were not in the industry could get a more realistic sense of what it's like down in the trenches. For those people who really want to get into the business, maybe it'll scare off some of the punks and tell other people what's really happening.

Things are certainly changing. I guess they always are, but right now seems to be a really interesting time.

The industry is changing exponentially now. So you have video games that are becoming more like movies and movies that are becoming more like video games. I think they're all going to merge at some point.

Which is bad, I think.

Well, it's hard to say. Technology—you can't stop it. I used to joke years ago on the set that one day a company would come to Jack Nicholson and go, "Jack, you've had a long career. We're just gonna scan you, and you can go play golf the rest of your life." He'll never be sick; he'll never argue with the director, he'll always know his lines. And I joked about that 'til one day doing a very simple TV movie called *Love Bug* for Disney, a guy comes up with a camera and says, "Bruce, I'm gonna take some reference shots of you. Just side profile and a front-on with your racing helmet on. And I'm like, "Why?" He said, "Oh, we're gonna pop a wheelie and we're just gonna put you in the car." This is 1997, some simple little Disney TV movie. This is the kind of stuff where...you know, if I were a stuntman right now, I'd be worried. I'd be really worried.

Well, a few years from now everything's gonna be blue screens anyway.

Well, half of it is. Movies like *Spider-Man*—good lord, who knows what's real in a movie like that any more?

I guess the whole idea of moviemaking is fantasy. I'm supposed to completely lose myself to what I'm watching, so long as it's done well, I guess you go with it, huh?

Well, there are two approaches to effects. There's one where it's like *The Mummy*, where your effects are designed to defy optics. Whereas a movie like *Forrest Gump*, the special effects are only there to tell the story. Look, here's a guy with no legs. To this day, I'll tell you, there are people all across America that say, "That poor actor with no legs, he was good." That's what I like to see effects used for: they service the story. They're not *the* story.

We're finding out now, now that we're becoming more effects-laden, we're still not making more money at the box office. Last year was down. So the point is, you can throw digital effects at people and hit them in the face, but if you don't have any story to tell, at the end of the day it's going to leave people cold. They may go see it, but there's no reason for them to tell their friends, "You've got to see this movie."

Hopefully it doesn't ruin the craft.

I want filmmakers to learn their craft for starters before they

"It's like George Lucas going back and fixing his crappy effects he had in *Star Wars*. There's no going back. Every decision was a good decision at the time. When you're a broke actor, *Maniac Cop* is looking pretty good."

go in and do their first movie. I get so many emails from people saying, "Hey Bruce, I'm gonna make my first movie next week. Where can I get film?" And I'm like, "You're not ready, Jack."

[laughs] But hey, at least they're trying; they've got the passion.

You know what, here's the downside to all this technology: making movies easier. Movies used to be very hard to make. There was a tremendous amount of drudgery during editing; you're looking for little one- and two-frame trims at the bottom of a trim bin. And you're hanging them on little hooks. That was a great filter; it kept all the yahoos away. Because they went, "Ah, this sucks! This is hard!" And now it's just click-click-click, you're editing on your computer. So the good news is that everybody in America can make a movie. The bad news is that everyone in America can make a movie. But the upside is that a guy in Buttcrack, Indiana can now compete with Hollywood. And more power to 'em. More power to the Blair Witches of the world.

You seem to really, really love what you do. Is that a false statement?

No, that's a good statement. But you know, like anyone, I get into situations I wish I hadn't. Situations not as creative as I thought they would be. So it's hit or miss too. I just try and make the best out of it.

And what's the best part of being Bruce Campbell?

I don't have to wear a tie and sit in a cubicle. **play**

where she came from. All roads lead to B movies. You either come from there or you wind up there. Either way, you're going to be passing through that neighborhood. You know, James Cameron directed *Piranha II*. Let's not forget that.

Yeah, you're definitely right. Everyone has to start somewhere. Make it the best you can. How can you not love it?

The B movie world, that's where the action is, because you don't have the pressure to perform. You don't have to make 38 million the opening weekend or it's considered a bomb. *Bubba Ho-Tep* cost under a million dollars. You look at the box office; I think we've broken the two-million dollar mark. And to most movies you'd say, "What a failure!" But to us we're going, "Oh my god, we made two-million dollars!" [laughs]

That's a lot of money, that's a nice 100 percent profit! It's huge. We're as successful as *Titanic* now, dollar for dollar. I'm joking, of course. But *Titanic* had to make a billion dollars worldwide. It had to. I mean, if your movie costs 200 million dollars, you have to make six to break even.

Which is, of course, insane. But I guess that's how the Hollywood machine works now.

How can you assume that your movie is going to make 600 million dollars? Because once you do all that split with distribution and theaters, that's what's left, like a third.

Yeah, I guess everyone has their specific goals... There needs to just be more enjoying the process. You really seem to take a vested interest in everything, fans especially. On your website, you have a lot of interesting rants and raves. You're a complete stranger to me, but reading all that stuff can be fun and makes you more of a person than a guy simply going about his business onscreen. I really liked the advice you have for tackling the industry...



Kill Bill Vol. 1

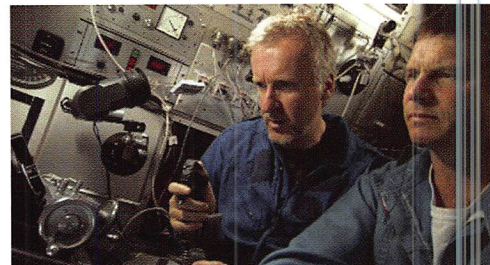
Starring: Uma Thurman, Lucy Liu, Vivica A. Fox, Daryl Hannah, David Carradine
Director: Quentin Tarantino
Released By: Miramax
Rated: R

Kill Bill Vol. 1 is a pure rush of film adrenaline—an unapologetic revenge tale that wants nothing more than to dazzle and thrill with its visual virtuosity. As the body counts rise from the stylized carnage—marvel at the outrageously violent spectacle of an anime sequence, behold the vicious final showdown framed with quiet beauty—you can't help but root for the beleaguered Bride (a perfectly cast Uma Thurman), who's out on a killing rampage to knock off Bill (Carradine) and his gang of thugs responsible for her wedding massacre. So say its detractors: *Kill Bill Vol. 1* isn't really much about anything, right? Come on, it's about that pure rush of feeling, the guttural results of a director at the top of his one-of-a-kind game. Quentin Tarantino reached for much higher character ground in his past films, but here he works for quick setup and a masterful execution towards a transcendent homage to beloved genre pics. More power to him. You watch *Kill Bill Vol. 1* with eyes wide open, viscerally sharing in the director's scholarly love for film. Every shot is a joy to watch, the way the color paints like a sharp comic book panel. Every line of dialogue, no matter how light, must be lapped up with a beaming smile. And just try to imagine any other choice of music to pump up the images. The only downside to this wildly entertaining film is that it feels a little incomplete and obviously left to be tied together with the equally exciting *Vol. 2*. Part two is perhaps more satisfying in the end, filled with much more snappy dialogue and randomly delicious geek diatribes. But let's not get ahead of ourselves: pick up *Vol. 1* in the wait for the inevitable two-part collection, and see just what the word "cool" really should be used for. Extras: Here we go again: the good stuff is probably being saved for the inevitable release of both volumes. For now, an incomplete director, star and producer commentary leave us wanting much more. The two videos performed by the 5.6.7.8's are fun additions. **BF**
Movie: A- **DVD:** C-

Ghosts of the Abyss

Starring: Bill Paxton
Director: James Cameron
Released By: Buena Vista Pictures
Rated: PG

James Cameron's *Ghosts of the Abyss* is more interesting than fully entertaining, suffering in its transplant from the giant 3-D Imax screens to DVD. We've seen a lot of this stuff before, but Cameron's keen visual eye certainly casts a strong light over the Titanic's eerie grave. This is basically a low-key documentary narrated by a strenuously earnest Bill Paxton, who accompanies Cameron and crew to the familiar ocean depths where yet again we see scattered debris and various sections of the infamous ship. In between the impressive shots of the ship and the gorgeous waters that contain her, little special effects fill around the facts and figures that detail all there is to know



about the Titanic and what it takes to make the expedition to uncover the grand ship's mysteries, what few may be left.

Extras: There's an extended 90-minute version of the film on this two-disc set. The only other mentionable addition is *Reflections From the Deep*, a 31-minute collection of interviews, extra footage and six breakdown segments of the filming. **BF**

Movie: B- **DVD:** C-



House of Sand and Fog

Starring: Jennifer Connelly, Ben Kingsley, Ron Eldard, Frances Fisher, Kim Dickens
Director: Vadim Perelman
Released By: DreamWorks
Rated: R

To watch the tragic events build in *House of Sand and Fog* is to feel a loss and desperation that cuts deep. This dourly charged movie could be accused of trapping us with lugubrious drama, but below the obvious surface runs a powerful current of emotional subtext. The story follows a struggling homeowner named Kathy Nicolo (Connelly), who's neglected tax payments lead to the eventual cheap sale of her house to an immigrant family from Iran. Ben Kingsley, in one of the great performances in recent cinema, plays the family's proud father, who was once a respected colonel of wealth and prestige, now left to struggle in America working dead-end jobs as his finances quickly disappear. He loves his family and demands their undying respect, but in a struggle to fend off the belligerent Nicolo fighting to get back her home, stubborn dignity leads to a downward spiral for both sides. No one person is necessarily right or wrong, merely trapped in desperation and a moral ambiguity we can very quickly connect to. What happens during the climax borders on cheap manipulation, but so moving are the performances and the stark reality they portray that we walk away with our hearts bleeding. Delicately told and emotionally wound, *House of Sand and Fog* hangs with a heavy impact.

Extras: A strong commentary by director Perelman, actor Kingsley and Andre Dubus III, the novelist whose work the film is based on. Deleted scenes and a decent behind-the-scenes featurette. **BF**

Movie: A- **DVD:** B-

Timeline

Starring: Paul Walker, Frances O'Connor, Gerard Butler, Billy Connolly
Director: Richard Donner
Released By: Paramount
Rated: PG-13

Few filmmakers set out to make movies like *Timeline* (based on the Michael Crichton novel of the week) in the conventional Hollywood way. And rightly so; it's difficult, if not impossible, to reenact medieval battles without the aid of digital effects, much less for a PG-13 audience. Aluminum swords, no matter how realistic, just don't carry the cinematic weight and sound of the real thing, and you need gallons of blood, of which *Timeline* doesn't shed a drop. Though authentic looking in parts, it never reaches the magnitude of what Luc Besson did with *The Messenger: Joan of Arc* using similar techniques, with the benefit of an R rating. Considering all of this, along with the story—about modern-day archaeologists who travel back in time to rescue their boss and father, chasing a clue he left yesterday, which for him happens to be 600 years in the future—*Timeline* is a fun-to-watch if somewhat hokey action period piece intertwined with contrived family pride and a couple of love stories that never get off of simmer. Extras: Like a Richard Donner infomercial. The set was so touchy-feely, it's no wonder the film has no edge. This had to be the friendliest, low-stress production ever. At this juncture in his accomplished career, he seems content no matter what the situation in this very comprehensive look behind the scenes. **DH**

Movie: C **DVD:** B



The Triplets of Belleville

Starring: (voice talent) Béatrice Bonifassi, Lina Boudreault, Michèle Caucheteux, Jean-Claude Donda
Director: Sylvain Chomet
Released By: Columbia Tristar
Rated: PG-13

With the exception of *Kill Bill Volumes 1 & 2* and *Return of the King*, *The Triplets of Belleville* is the best film I've seen in a year, and now my all-time favorite animated feature film (not counting anime, of course). How *Nemo* won the Oscar over this boggles my mind. There is literally no comparison. Sure, *Nemo* was beautiful, adventurous and cheeky as a friendly great white shark, but it doesn't even come close to the charm and craft of this exquisite slice of animated life. Besides, anything that ends with a Randy Newman song scares me. The guy sounds like he should be working at a Shakey's Pizza. Telling its heartfelt, bittersweet and altogether brilliantly woven story almost entirely through expression, *Triplets* is a testament to the power of animation and imagery, ingeniously assembled using the seamless integration of CG and traditional animation, easily the best synthesis of these techniques to date. I can't remember ever being so captivated. It reaches our deepest emotions without ever speaking a word. I was pretty much dumbfounded for the duration.

Extras: Not bad given its French roots and humble pedigree. Sylvain Chomet is truly a visionary. **DH**

Movie: A **DVD:** B



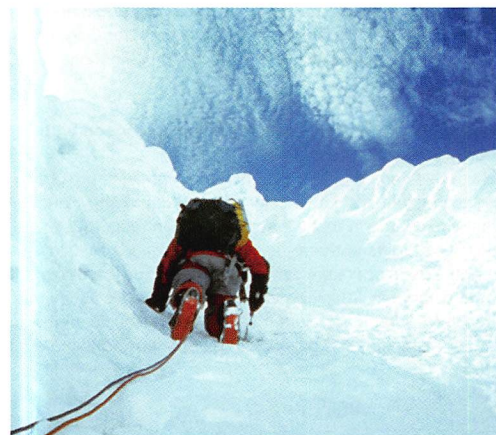
Touching the Void

Starring: Nicholas Aaron, Richard Hawking, Brendan Mackey, Joe Simpson
Director: Kevin Macdonald
Released By: MGM
Rated: R

When your friend and sworn climbing partner hangs helplessly on your rope, dangling over the lip of a snow-blown mountain several stories below, what do you do? If you're Simon Yates, a real-life British climber tackling the treacherous Siula Grande in Peru, you pull out your trusty pocketknife and make the cut. What happens next is a harrowing, remarkable fight for survival in *Touching the Void*, a vivid retelling of these two men's struggle from the base of the 21,000-foot mountain—no one has reached the top since—to the eventual horror of the returning descent. When victim Joe Simpson ends up falling into the darkness of a hauntingly beautiful crevice, his partner believes him dead, leaving him to nurse a badly broken leg while somehow miraculously making it to the base alive—often crawling inches at a time. As actors convincingly play out the harrowing climb, shot with a gorgeous, frighteningly real intensity, the real-life climbers narrate the events. That we know the outcome makes little difference. *Touching the Void* leaves you breathless.

Extras: How'd they shoot all that amazing footage? A disappointing director commentary shows us a little and bores with Macdonald's recap of what we've already seen for ourselves. What Happened Next is an informative interview with survivors Simpson and Yates. **BF**

Movie: B+ **DVD:** B-



Invader Zim Vol. 1: Doom, Doom, Doom

Starring: (voice talent) Richard Steven Horvitz, Andy Berman, Rosearik Rikki Simons
Creator: Jhonen Vasquez
Released By: Media Blasters
Rated: TV-y7

If you're over the age of 8, breathing, and living in America, you need to go out right now and buy this DVD. Why? Because *Invader Zim* is one of the best things to happen to American TV animation in a decade. Where *Samurai Jack* skews a little older and *Mucha Lucha* is for the criminally insane (oh, how I love both), *Zim* scores across the board. Banished from the Irken Empire after nearly destroying his home planet on an earlier mission, Zim is sent to Earth on a secret, ahem, suicide mission to investigate the behavior of Earthlings by his leaders, Almighty Tallest Red and Purple. Zim, and his dog/robot sidekick GIR, must weather the storm of his schoolmate Dib's suspicion, who is absolutely, positively positive that the new kid is an alien, while taking on the extreme elements of Earth...like cafeteria food! As wall-to-wall hilariously and wonderfully written as it is, the *Zim* aesthetic is equally magnetic—a combination of computer graphics and digital animation with a purple and green almost Goth/metallic appearance. Extras: If you're still sane after two discs worth (3 hours and 45 minutes) of *Zim*, there are some slim pickings (likely being doled out over all of the volumes) of which the pilot episode is the treasure here. The voice actor interviews lend a little insight, but the guy we really want to hear from, creator Jhonen Vasquez, is nowhere to be found. **DH**

Movie: A- **DVD:** C+



The Music of Hitman: Contracts

Interview

Composer Jesper Kyd, Jesper Kyd Productions

Jesper Kyd is a veteran game music composer, with published soundtracks on platforms from the Amiga and Genesis to PS2 and Xbox. Always pushing the envelope and cranking impossibly good sound out of any hardware, Jesper graduated to produce award-winning cinematic scores for *Hitman 2* and *Freedom Fighters*. He continues to have a true passion for deep and melodic electronica, and it is this type of score that guides Agent 47 through the dark recesses of memory in *Hitman: Contracts*. We spoke with Jesper regarding the game's music development. **Mike Griffin**



Photo: Wes Bender

play: What kind of studio set-up did you use during the *Hitman: Contracts* soundtrack process?

Jesper Kyd: I have five music computers, about 28 synthesizers, a few drum machines, and tons of effects and plug-ins. I also worked with Io on designing the music system for *Contracts*.

How early in the project did Eidos approach you, and do you expect to be on board for future *Hitman* projects?

It was pretty early actually, and I was able to check out the game. We enjoy very good communication when it comes to the *Hitman* stuff. You can never assume anything, but I've done the music for all these games, so it's possible I'll do more.

Was it clear from the beginning that they were aiming

for a darker vibe than previous entries in the series?

In the first couple of meetings we had, it was quite apparent that this was going to be a very different *Hitman* compared to the second game, and we definitely needed the music to convey this. Ideas started to take shape from that point on, when I knew it was going to be a darker experience—not so epic and grand like *Hitman 2*.

Would you say this soundtrack is a reflection of the character's disturbing life?

Getting to know 47, and how crazy the worlds are that he has been a part of, that's the really interesting part that comes out in this game. *Contracts* definitely tries to get inside your head, and the story is portrayed in that way. With *Hitman 2*, it was more from an outside perspective. So it was a very conscious decision to make music that

captures how he feels.

Did you feel this was best conveyed with a purely electronic score?

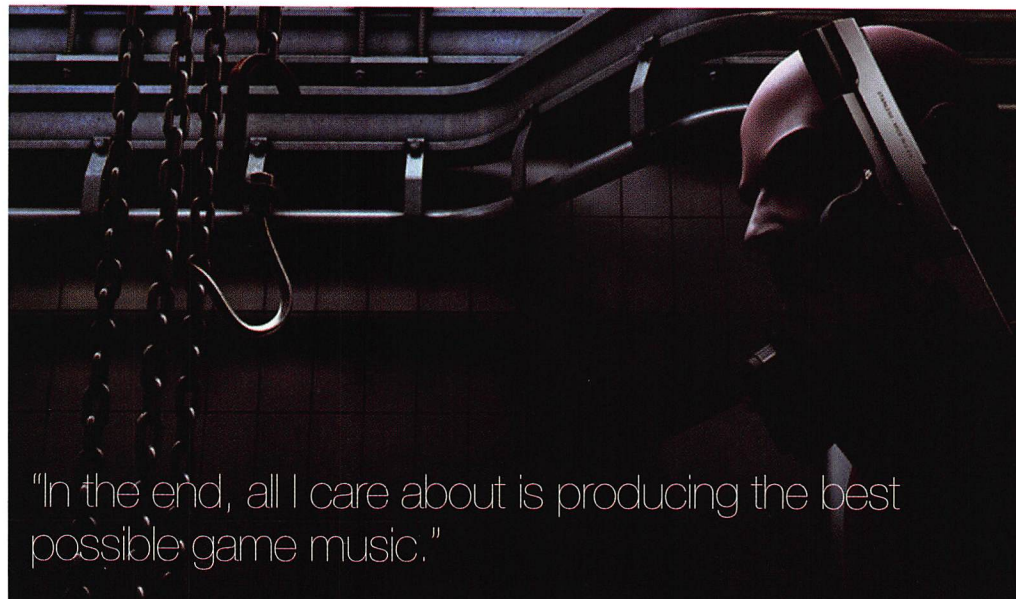
It felt like the right move. If you use an orchestral score and it's very dark and brooding all the time, unless you have really big melodies, it's going to get annoying. Listening to it over and over again is just not doable. We wanted this music to have a presence all the time, so the player would have a constant stream of feelings connected to 47 and the game world.

You were given a rare opportunity on this project to create full-length, six- to seven-minute tracks. How does this compare to the norm?

The max is usually around four minutes. I thought it was very important for this music to play a role in the game's atmosphere fulltime. Whereas with *Hitman 2*, we have a lot of breaks and insertions in the sound design, and it adds a touch of realism to incidental game events, for *Contracts* it's the opposite in many ways. This is a much richer soundtrack.

Were there any expectations that you'd proceed with your orchestral stuff?

Yeah, I think so. You know, it's great to work with big choirs and orchestras. It's a lot of fun, and you get to show people what you can do in that element. With *Contracts* though, I saw it as a different genre—and a score needs to follow what the developers are aiming for. That is the job of the game composer. I think good electronic music is at least as difficult to write, if not more, than orchestral music. In the end, all I care about is producing the best possible game music.



"In the end, all I care about is producing the best possible game music."

Jesper's next major project was still top secret when we conducted this interview, but he said it would involve dynamic adaptive audio using a full orchestra—requiring some interesting innovations. There's no challenge too daunting for this composer.

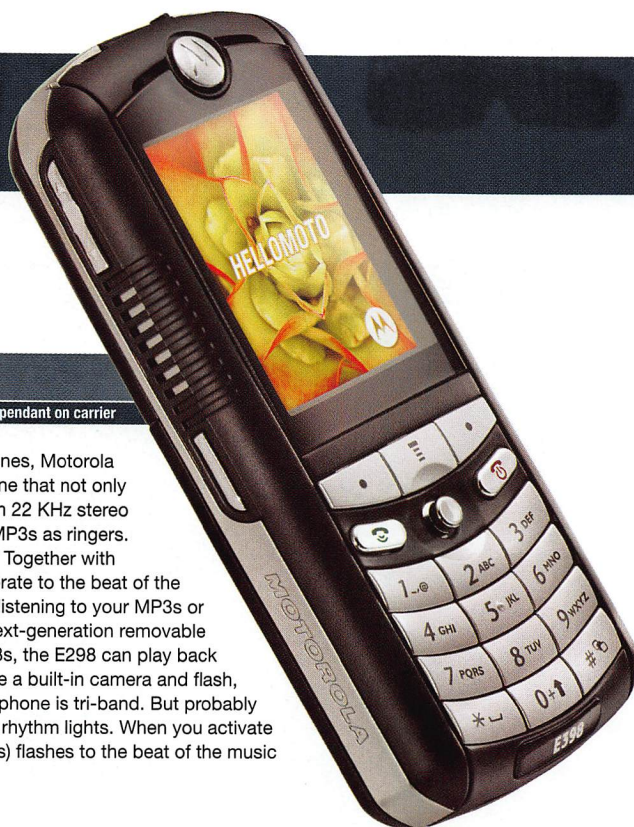
Surround-sound phone

Motorola E398

www.motorola.com

Price: TBD — dependant on carrier

If you're sick of those cheesy-ass MIDI ring tones, Motorola has the solution. The E398 is the first cell phone that not only gives you 3D surround sound (with dual 16mm 22 KHz stereo speakers), but it allows you to use your own MP3s as ringers. The dual-speaker technology is extraordinary. Together with Reactive Touch Technology, the phone will vibrate to the beat of the music—giving you the added “oomph” when listening to your MP3s or ringers. What's cool is that the E398 uses a next-generation removable memory card to store data. In addition to MP3s, the E298 can play back MPEG-4 video files. Other key features include a built-in camera and flash, a vibrant 176X220 color display and, yes, the phone is tri-band. But probably the coolest feature of the phone is the built-in rhythm lights. When you activate them, the color display (and lights on the sides) flashes to the beat of the music around you. **Tom Ham**



Super-slim digital camera

Panasonic SV-AS10S

www.panasonic.com

Price: \$399

Whether you want to take snapshots at a party or film your significant other getting dress...err...an award, you may want to check out this little bad boy. The SV-AS10S weighs a mere .13 lbs and is packed with a host of great features. Not only is it a 2.0 megapixel camera, but it can also record (and play) QuickTime movies, play MP3s and be used as a voice recorder. Measuring 4-1/8 inches long by 2 inches wide and 1/3 inch thick, you'll almost forget you have this in your pocket. With the included USB cradle, users can upload/download content in a snap. Storage is courtesy of SD Memory Cards, which also can be shared with a host of other compatible products. So that DVD you compressed on your laptop can be transferred onto a memory card and then watched on the SV-AS10S. **Tom Ham**



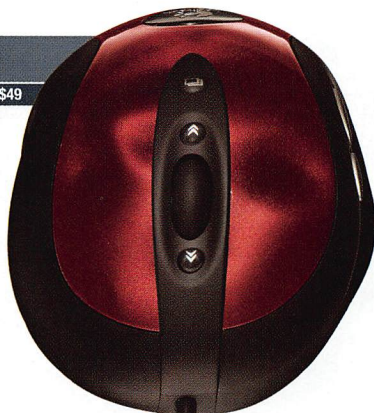
Ultra-responsive optical mouse

Logitech MX 510

www.logitech.com

Price: \$49

If you're like most PC gamers (myself included), you're always itching for that little extra edge when playing. Enter Logitech's latest optical mouse—the MX 510. If you want the ultimate in precision and performance (as well as something that looks cool as hell on your desk), this mouse is it. What's so special about it? The MX 510 utilizes the new and improved MX Optical Engine—which combines high resolution with higher frame rates. The optical sensor picks up 800 dpi at an incredible 5.8 megapixels per second. Users can expect instant response from fast movements of your mouse. Looking for the ultimate mouse for games? The MX 510 is all you need. **Tom Ham**



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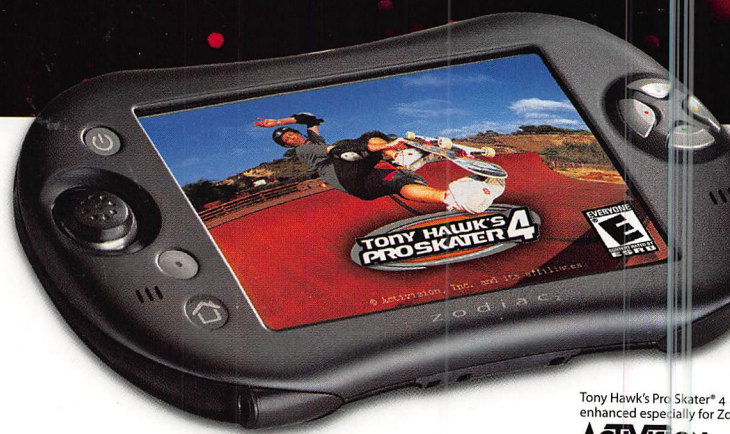
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